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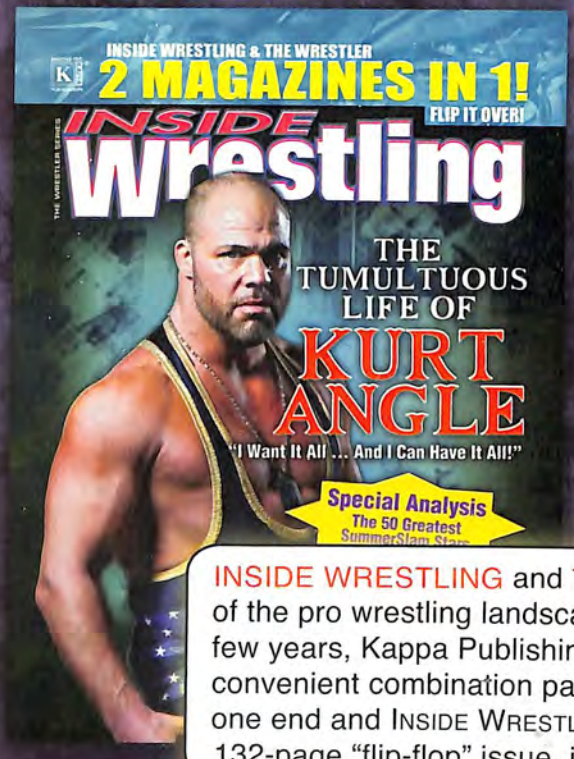

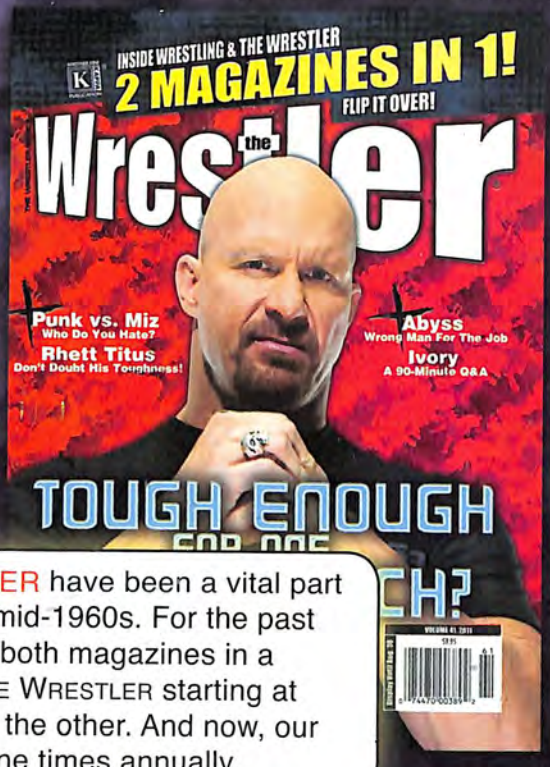

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VOLUME 42, 2011

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Look for the Volume 43, 2011 issue of *The Wrestler/Inside Wrestling*, on sale October 11, 2011

YOUR LETTERS

AGELESS ICON

I have recently read a lot of griping about aging legends lingering too long in the spotlight, but regardless, I feel that Sting—while now past 50—is by far the most interesting and exciting wrestler in any promotion today. His recent feud with Hulk Hogan and transformation into a Joker-like persona has been absolutely riveting to watch.

Yes, he may have lost a step or two due to injuries and time, but Sting is still incredibly quick, athletic, and skilled in the ring. I would much rather see Sting, who is not only a great wrestler, but also a skilled promo man who presents a fully realized character with depth and nuance, in the spotlight than some unseasoned "sports entertainer" whose only qualification for being pushed on to weekly television seems to be that he looks like an underwear model.

If an older wrestler can still move well in the ring and still has the passion and drive to stay in top shape and develop his character, as Sting has, I say, stay as long as you like!

Modern wrestling promotions need good, solid veterans to act as leaders the younger talent can look up to now more than ever, and Sting fits the bill perfectly.

God bless you, Sting! Your passion, attention to detail, and hard work are both entertaining and inspiring.

JOE JALBERT
Regina, SK

Photo by George Napolitano

While Jack Swagger seemed poised to accomplish great things in WWE, he continues to struggle even against foes over whom he holds a distinct size advantage. Reader Andrew Skarupa says "The All-American American" might benefit from the services of a manager.

SWAGGER-LESS

I just can't understand why Jack Swagger, who has been blessed with so much athleticism, continues to struggle in WWE.

Sure, expectations for Swagger were very high right from the start of his career, but after experiencing so much success at the collegiate level, I thought he'd have been able to handle whatever faced him in WWE. Apparently not.

I truly believe that he needs a manager at this point, because it is obvious that Jack has lost his swagger.

ANDREW SKARUPA
Denver, CO

STILL CLASSY

Thank you so much for doing your latest "Q&A" interview with one of my all-time favorite wrestlers, Ivory (Volume 41, 2011).

As a teenager, I watched Ivory as Tina Ferrari on *G.L.O.W.* each Sunday morning. I was always impressed with her intensity and ability. It always seemed as if she gave 100 percent effort every time she was in the ring.

However, it was during her run in WWE that I really started to appreciate her skills. Of course, wrestling during the WWF Attitude Era, she participated in some of the more base storylines, but it was always clear to me that Ivory was much more than a bimbo who liked to parade around in her bra and panties. She was a real wrestler with real talent.

I thoroughly enjoyed catching up on Ivory and was very happy to see that she still seems to be the same classy and spirited lady I've enjoyed watching over the years.

SARAH ROSE LYNCH
San Diego, CA

ADIOS, JARRETTS!

What business do Jeff and Karen Jarrett have invading AAA, running down the promotion and the country of Mexico? If TNA

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wants to engage in a talent exchange between promotions, fine. There are plenty of TNA wrestlers I would love to see on a live card. I am sure there are many TNA fans that feel the same way about AAA wrestlers, too. What I don't want or need to see is Jarrett and his crow of a wife, Karen, insulting the traditions and wrestlers of AAA and my native country.

Please, Jarretts, give El Zorro a fair rematch so that he can take back the AAA championship and send you two packing back to the Impact Zone, which is where you should stay.

RAFAEL GOMEZ
Mexico City, Mexico

LISTEN UP, WWE

In response to the question posed on the cover of your previous issue regarding Steve Austin, "Tough Enough For One More Match?" (Volume 41, 2011), all I can say is WWE fans (and wrestling fans in general) should only be so lucky to get "Stone-Cold" back for one more match. There are so many wrestlers on Raw and Smackdown who need a "Stunner" that there's no way WWE could limit Austin to just a single match.

I think "Stone-Cold" should come back for a final tour. Hopefully, WWE officials can hear all of us longtime Austin fans who want so badly to see him return!

PERRY BRANDLER
Cincinnati, OH

Lee South/TNA Wrestling

If TNA fans think Jeff and Karen Jarrett are unpopular in the U.S., reader Rafael Gomez assures us they are even more contemptible to lucha libre fans in Mexico.

PLEASE DON'T GO!

Even though he recently dropped the Ring of Honor TV title to El Generico, I hope Christopher Daniels intends to remain with The House of Truth in ROH. I have nothing against TNA, but Daniels is my favorite wrestler and I can only watch him perform in Ring of Honor, as TNA rarely visits my area.

BILL BUTLER
Selinsgrove, PA

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WHAT'S HAPPENING

BY DAN MURPHY

AFTER MONTHS OF being neglected, devalued, and generally buried on television, TNA's X division returned to center stage on July 10 at Destination X.

The unique pay-per-view featured eight X division matches, while many of the company's top stars (including **Mr. Anderson**, **Sting**, **Beer Money**, and **Hulk Hogan**) were left off the card entirely. In some ways, the event was reminiscent of 2010's Hardcore Justice PPV, which featured a one-shot ECW reunion and omitted most of the company's marquee names.

The six-sided ring was brought back for the event, which was headlined by **AJ Styles** against **Christopher Daniels**, reprising the most storied rivalry in X division history. Styles won the latest chapter in the ongoing rivalry of Fortune partners, beating Daniels after 28:30 of back-and-forth action.

Destination X also featured a match that was planned for last year's Hardcore Justice as two former ECW icons—and pioneers of the X division style—clashed, with **Rob Van Dam** defeating two-time former X division champion **Jerry Lynn**.

In other matches, **Brian Kendrick** brought the X division back home with a stirring victory over **Abyss**; former Ring of Honor champion **Austin Aries** won a contract with TNA, winning a four-way showcase match over **Jack Evans**, **Low-Ki**, and **Shiima Xion**; **Kazarian** defeated **Samoa Joe**; **Alex Shelley** won an Ultimate X match, which he dedicated to his injured partner, **Chris Sabin**; **Eric Young** and **Shark Boy** defeated **Generation Me**; and **Douglas Williams** pinned **Mark Haskins**.

It will be interesting to see if TNA will continue to build on the momentum from Destination X, or whether the X division will be relegated to lower-card status once the dust settles.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

With as many moves as Brian Kendrick has at his disposal, sometimes a good old-fashioned chomp of the fingers is the best course of action. Kendrick overcame a 166-pound weight disadvantage to take the X division title from Abyss.

A new era began in Ring of Honor when **Davey Richards** defeated his **American Wolves** partner **Eddie Edwards** for the ROH title on June 26 at Best in the World. More than 2,500 fans packed the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City, with several thousands more fans watching on iPPV, as Richards outlasted Edwards in a 36-minute clash that had fans chanting, "Match of the Year."

After the match, an emotional Richards addressed the fans, saying that he had lost his parents and had broken up with his girlfriend, and that the ROH championship meant everything to him. He ended with a call-out to his grandfather, saying, "Hey, Grandpa, I did it!"

Congratulations to Richards, and to former champion Edwards, who wrestled a competitive match and conducted himself with sportsmanship and honor. ROH has a worthy champion as it enters a new era with Sinclair Broadcasting. *(For more on the match, see page 42.)*

In other news from the Best in the World event, **Kevin Steen**, who had lost a loser-leaves-ROH match to **El Generico** in December 2010, came to ringside before a match between **Steve Corino** and **Michael Elgin**. Steen started to apologize for his previous behavior in ROH, then launched a verbal attack on the company not suitable for a family publication and proceeded to attack Corino, waylaying his former manager and tag team partner with a package piledriver. Following Steen's outburst, a furious **Jim Cornette** swore on his mother's grave that Steen would never wrestle in ROH again.

One rumor that has to keep the ROH brass up at night is the talk that **The Kings of Wrestling**, **Chris Hero** and **Claudio Castagnoli**, may be headed to WWE. Rumor has it that

While his Motor City Machine Guns partner, Chris Sabin, recuperates from knee surgery, life goes on for Alex Shelley, who emerged with the X (thus being guaranteed an X division title match) after beating Robbie E, Amazing Red, and Shannon Moore in a thrilling Ultimate X match.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Photo by Scott Finkelstein

Kevin Steen created all sorts of havoc at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom when he defiantly returned to Ring of Honor and attacked his former manager and partner Steve Corino. ROH Executive Producer Jim Cornette is livid.

Hero and Castagnoli have caught the eye of WWE talent scouts and that the former ROH tag champions may be brought into WWE as a tag team.

Castagnoli didn't make anyone in Baltimore (Sinclair's home base) feel any better when he said on the *Right After Wrestling* radio show on Sirius satellite radio, "I think I would prefer to go as a package with Chris Hero. But I would be comfortable working there on my own. I think we definitely have very good chemistry and we have greater potential as a team … We have the tools to flourish in any wrestling company."

Another wrestler who proved he could flourish in any company is **Jeff Jarrett**. The "King Of The Mountain" made the most of his forced sabbatical to Mexico by winning the AAA heavyweight title at the company's signature TripleMania event, defeating **El Zorro** for the title. Jarrett was accompanied by his wife, **Karen**, and the Jarretts quickly made themselves two of the most hated gringos in Mexico by disrespecting the fans, the Spanish language, and the AAA organization. Jarrett interrupted a post-show press conference with **Dr. Wagner Jr.**

"The Queen and I decided that we would come to Mexico and take over wrestling here, and that's exactly what we did," Jarrett said to the Mexican media. "Tonight, I am the champion, and we have replaced the initials of AAA with TNA."

On the independent scene, **MASADA** won Combat Zone Wrestling's 10th annual Tournament of Death event. The veteran masochist defeated **Dysfunction** in a "Fans Bring The Weapons" match, **Matt Tremont** in "Kenzans, Whips, and Anything We Can Find In The Back" match, and **Masashi Takeda** in a barbed-wire "Light Tubes And Panes Of Glass" match. Not for the squeamish.

WWE's Smackdown crew fell victim to some shady baggage handlers on a recent tour of South Africa. Several WWE stars had their luggage opened—in some cases, locks were broken off bags—and had their valuables removed. The thefts occurred during a flight between Johannesburg and Cape Town. According to a Tweet from **Randy Orton**, more than half of the crew was victimized.

Christian made his feelings known in an interview with the *Independent Online* newspaper.

"I step off a plane, my baggage is broken into—you rip off the locks and you steal my clothes. Is this what this country is all about? Then shame on you!"

Two-time WWF World champion **Bruno Sammartino** is recuperating after heart valve replacement surgery. Bruno had sustained damage to his heart during a childhood battle with rheumatic fever, but had recently gained 20 pounds due to fluid buildup in his abdomen due to the deterioration of his heart valves. He is expected to make a full recovery.

Photo by Peter Kramer/NHL

Linda Bollea, the ex-wife of **Hulk Hogan**, has been making the media rounds to promote her autobiography, *Wrestling The Hulk: My Life Against The Ropes*. Among the many allegations she makes against her ex-husband, Linda claims that Hulk physically abused her and intimidated her. "I was always

afraid he would kill me in one of his rages," she said in an interview on the *Today* show. Hogan strongly denied the allegations.

The Speed Channel has taped the initial pilot episodes for a new wrestling venture, titled *All Wheels Wrestling*. The show is a new hybrid of pro wrestling and auto racing, with four teams competing in a points-based competition. The new promotion is taping at the Impact Zone in Orlando, in partnership with TNA. The four teams are captained by RPM (**Jay Lethal** wearing a mask), **Aaron Aguilera**, **Sonjay Dutt** (billed as Schwag Dutt), and **Shawn Daivari** (billed as Dubai). **Jeremy Borash** and **Don West** are the broadcast team.

High-flying WWE sensation **Sin Cara** was handed a 30-day suspension in mid-July for his first violation of the WWE Wellness Program. As of press time, no details on the nature of the violation were available, although we doubt there's any truth to the rumors that Cara had been taking helium.

Charly Manson is living up to his namesake. The Mexican wrestler has been arrested after a fistfight with police officers. Manson allegedly punched officers while holding rocks in his hands, severely injuring one of the officers. In addition to his aggravated assault charge, Manson is also facing a civil suit from the officer he injured.

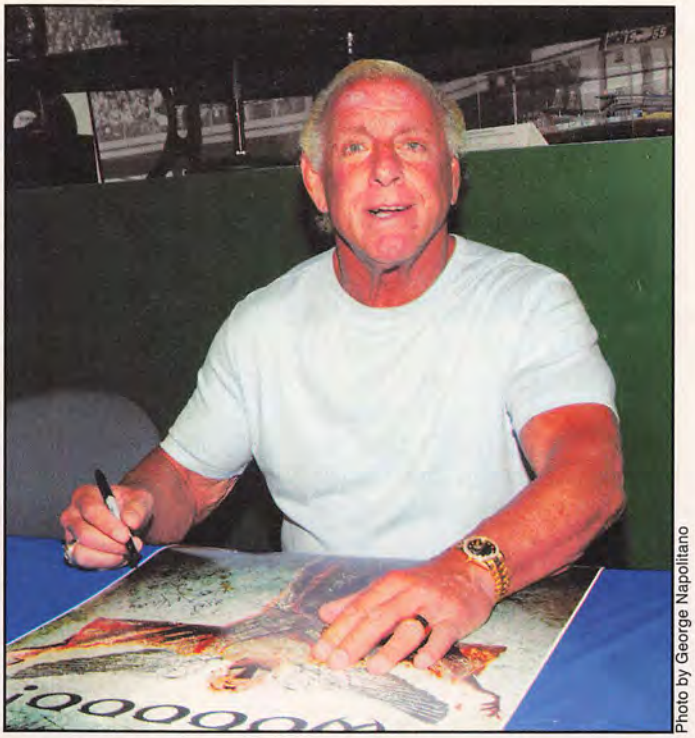


Photo by George Napolitano

Though $35,000 lighter in the pocket, at least Ric Flair doesn't have to concern himself with the threat of a jail sentence now that he's settled with Highspots Inc.

Linda Bollea is interviewed by the *Today* show's Matt Lauer following the release of her tell-all book about life with Hulk Hogan.

WWE is working on an interesting new DVD project involving **Shawn Michaels** and **Bret Hart**. According to sources familiar with the project, both men will discuss the events leading up to the 1997 Montreal Screwjob and its aftermath, building to the truce Hart and Michaels established last year. No word yet on when it will be released.

Florida independent wrestler **Justin Honeycutt** died in a bizarre accident while working at his day job at Magical Midway Thrill Park in Orlando. The 6'10" Honeycutt, who competed as "The Korean Monster" Ryze Woo, climbed scaffolding to check on a stalled ride at the park. While he was wearing a safety harness, Honeycutt apparently fell approximately six feet from the scaffolding, suffering fatal head injuries. He was 30.

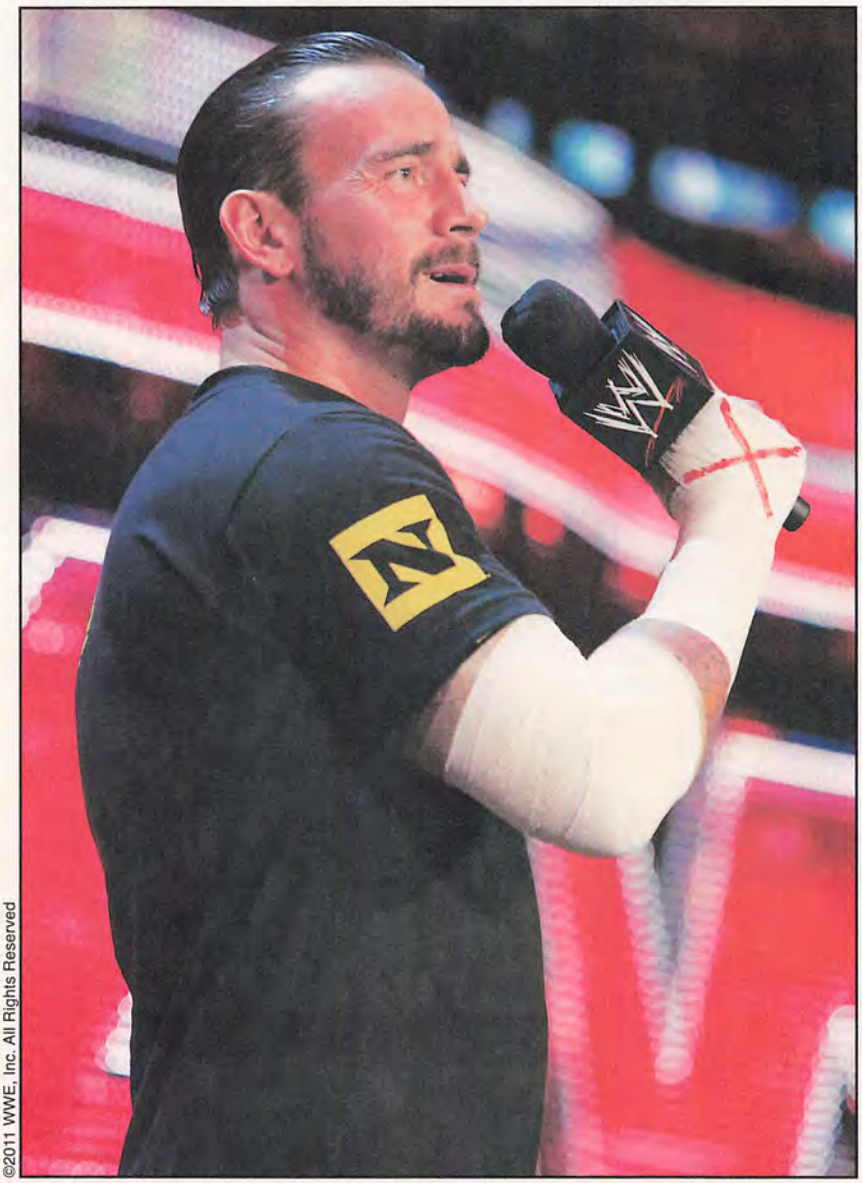
Keiji Muto has resigned from his position as president of All Japan Pro-Wrestling following an incident in which wrestler **Nobuzaku Hirai** was seriously injured in a lockerroom brawl with **TARU**. Hirai suffered an acute subdural hematoma in the beating, while several wrestlers looked on and did not break up the fight. TARU was suspended, along with three other wrestlers, for the incident, which has drawn considerable negative press in Japan. Muto had been president of All Japan since 2002. He was replaced by **Masayuki Uchida**.

And, finally, **Ric Flair** has agreed to cut the check. It took a threatened jail sentence, but Flair has paid Highspots Inc. a fee of $35,000 for advances paid by the online retail company for projects that the "Nature Boy" never fulfilled. Flair also kicked in 300 autographed photos, which are selling for $29.99 each. □

ON ASSIGNMENT

BY THE TIME this magazine hits newsstands, you will know whether CM Punk made good on his promise to leave WWE with the WWE championship and go on to defend it in New Japan or Ring of Honor. It doesn't seem very likely, but it also didn't seem very likely for Ric Flair to show up on WWF television with the NWA title belt in 1991, or for a WWF-contracted wrestler to beat a WCW-contracted wrestler for the ECW title belt back in 2000.

This sort of behavior isn't new to Punk, either. Back in 2005, he threatened to take the ROH title to WWE, even going so far as to sign his WWE contract on the ROH title belt. When it comes to a guy like Punk, anything can happen.



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Punk's rant at the end of the June 27 *Raw* was compelling TV, but he burned no bridges by touching on a few taboo subjects, says Liz Hunter.

But rather than speculate on what the coming weeks and months might hold, I'd rather take a close look at the content of his infamous show-ending promo from the June 27 edition of *Raw*. Punk seemingly broached several taboo subjects in that six-minute diatribe that shocked the wrestling world and resulted in a brief suspension. Now that we're a bit removed from that promo, tell me, was anything Punk said really as inflammatory as it first seemed?

The first controversial remark Punk made was when he said the only thing John Cena was good at was kissing Vince McMahon's ass. The language was a bit out of synch with WWE's new PG mandate, but the promo aired after 11 p.m. EST, which allows for a little more leeway than the 9 or 10 o'clock hours. And many popular "corporate champions"—such as Hulk Hogan and The Rock, both of whom Punk went on to mention—have been called similar names, either out of jealousy or as a shot against their backstage politics. Nothing groundbreaking here.

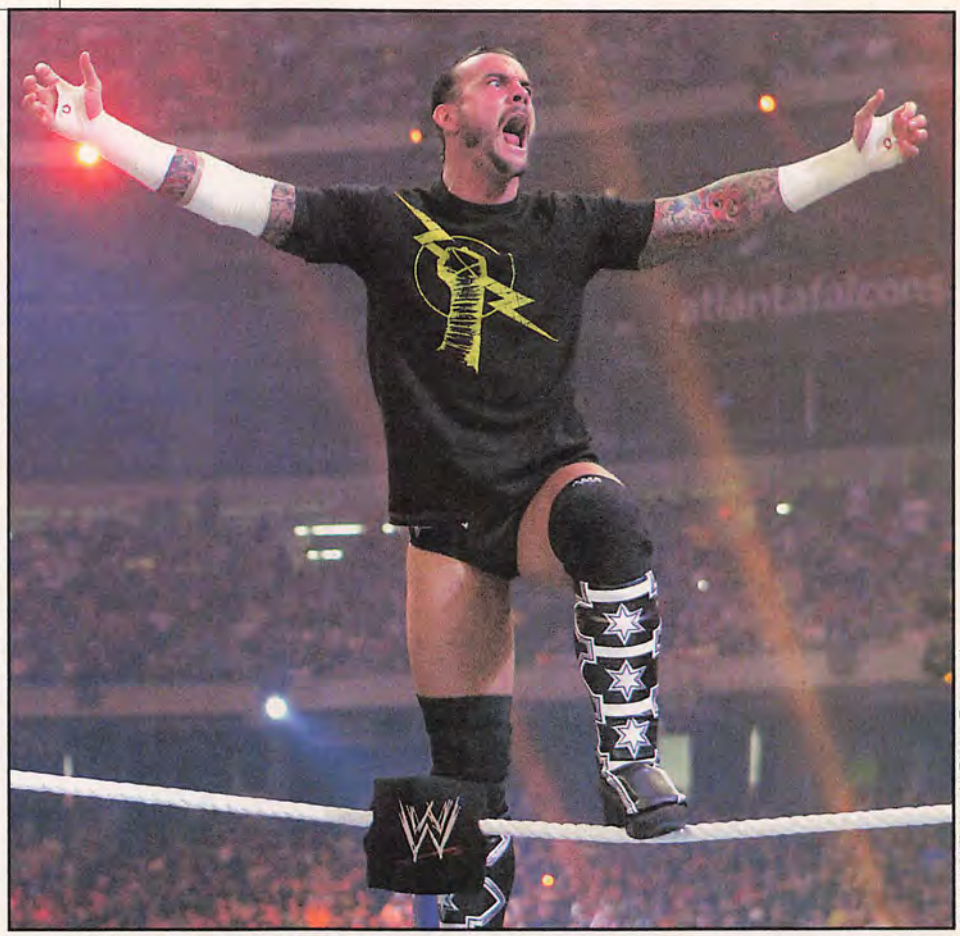
Punk went on to say he is "the best wrestler in the world." Given WWE's newfound reluctance to use the dreaded W-word, this was surprising, but it shouldn't have been. Punk has always considered himself a wrestler; not a sports-entertainer or a superstar or whatever new term comes into vogue. But Punk didn't dwell on the topic. In fact, he only said "wrestler" once. He didn't rip on WWE for abolishing the term. Instead of diving into some truly controversial areas, he only dipped in a toe and moved on.

Punk went on to say he was "a Paul Heyman guy," just like Brock Lesnar was. I seem to remember Jim Cornette as the guy who brought Lesnar into OVW, but no need to quibble. In fact, had Punk mentioned Cornette, that would have been even more controversial, as Cornette was fired from WWE and is

BY LIZ HUNTER

currently aligned with Ring of Honor. Mentioning Heyman and Lesnar isn't too controversial. Heck, Undertaker showed up at Lesnar's fight earlier this year and tried to challenge him to a match at WrestleMania. Obviously, Lesnar (and Heyman) have had some communication with WWE, so they're not in the never-mention category of Bruno Sammartino and Chris Benoit.

Another comment that got some attention was Punk saying that he wasn't appearing on "any crappy shows on the USA Network," a comment that can't please network representatives. Or can it? Heyman used to rip on TNN constantly back in the ECW era. Punk lifted a technique from Paul E's playbook. Punk is a star on one of the USA Network's highest-rated shows. His diatribe was making people tune in, and guaranteed that people would tune in the following week. Punk may have made a vague comment about "crappy shows" without mentioning any by name, but he also delivered super ratings for the network, so how angry can they have been?



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It's been quite some time since CM Punk has heard the cheers of the fans, but the venom he spat on *Raw* may just make him incredibly popular again.

Mentioning New Japan and ROH would have been a mortal sin in a previous era, but NJPW and ROH are hardly competition for WWE. Punk never said he would go back to TNA, which is the closest thing to competition WWE has these days. Again, Punk came close to broaching truly taboo subjects, but veered back.

Punk took things to a different level when he said that Vince McMahon surrounded himself with "glad-handing, nonsensical, douchebag, yes-men like John Laurinaitis," WWE's Executive Vice President of Talent Relations. It's true that Laurinaitis isn't very popular in some circles, but very few talent relations directors are. It's often their job to be the "bad cop." They are responsible for issuing firings, hiring (or rejecting) applicants, and handing out suspensions. It's a thankless job. I'm sure a lot of people loved hearing Punk rip on Laurinaitis, but Laurinaitis has a thick skin. He can take an occasional insult to build interest in a PPV match. Heck, Punk's insult was nothing compared to the things people used to yell at him when he skateboarded out to the ring as Johnny Ace in The Dynamic Dudes.

Punk mentioning McMahon's death seems shocking, but it was just a few years ago when McMahon faked his own death for storyline purposes. He mentioned Vince's "idiotic daughter," which seems bad ... until you remember that Chris Jericho used to call Stephanie a "filthy, dirty, disgusting, brutal, bottom-feeding, trash bag tramp." And Jericho has since said that Stephanie liked that line. And of all the things Punk could have said about Triple-H, calling him a "doofus" (without mentioning him by name) is pretty weak.

I don't mean to take anything away from Punk's promo, which I consider to be one of the greatest, most compelling segments I've seen in years. It was great TV. But he didn't burn any bridges. It won't kill Punk's WWE career.

In fact, it just might be the first step in making him WWE's most popular wrestler of 2012. □

ON THE FARM

BY LOUIE DEE

WELCOME, ANDY LEAVINE! While that may not have been a banner posted in the FCW locker-room in early-June, the sentiment is valid following the announcement of Leavine as the winner of WWE's *Tough Enough.* Leavine, who beat out Luke Robinson in the finale to earn a WWE contract—and, subsequently, a slap from Vince McMahon and a Stone-Cold Stunner from the show's brew-swilling host—has already reported to FCW for further training.

In an interview with wwe.com, the 23-year-old, 6'5", 270-pounder said that in going to FCW, "I get the opportunity to learn from the best … Their overall influence and wisdom are the biggest advantages I have toward becoming a true force to be reckoned with. I welcome all the challenges that I'm going to face."

FCW President Steve Keirn had kind words for the newcomer in the same piece, saying, "I felt like they made a great choice in Andy. He was really determined to make it and had a lot going for him: his size, his youth, his aggression. His heart seemed to be into it and we're happy that he made it."

There is no word at press time as to when Andy might make his FCW debut, but he has already been joined by one of his *TE* castmates, Christina Crawford, who gave up her previous WWE developmental deal to compete on *Tough Enough*, but was re-signed following the contest's conclusion.

A Night to Forget. The June 19 episode of *FCW TV* was that kind of night for Maxine, who lost her job, her lackey, and her meal ticket in the span of an hour.

Early in the show, Steve Keirn entered Maxine's office, telling her that she was being removed from the role of general manager … and being replaced by none other than Norman Smiley! A furious Maxine was then ordered into a match with the masked Ms. Florida after former associate Aksana refused to take the bout. She lost in five seconds!

And, if those two losses weren't hard enough to swallow, Maxine's main squeeze, Lucky Cannon, dropped the FCW championship to Bo Rotundo in the main event of the evening—completing an epic meltdown for FCW's former power couple.

Photo by Will Hart/USA Network

Andy Leavine received a warmer welcome from his new co-workers in Florida Championship Wrestling than he did from WWE Chairman Vince McMahon on the night he was announced as 2011's *Tough Enough* winner.

FCW has produced a plethora of talent for its parent company WWE over the past four years, including Ezekiel Jackson and Wade Barrett. Jackson was with the company when it debuted as a WWE developmental in 2007.

Fun in the ... Rain? Vince McMahon has always been an advocate of the phrase "The Show Must Go On."

Well, FCW's talent got a taste of that show biz mentality on June 24, as its Summer Slamarama Tour stop at McKechnie Field in Bradenton offered them an opportunity most of them have never experienced: wrestling in the pouring rain.

Doing anything outdoors during the summer is a gamble in Florida, and FCW came up on the wet end of that stick when inclement weather struck their scheduled eight-match card (and the Bradenton Marauders baseball game that preceded it).

The show was reduced to just five bouts due to the conditions, but even in limited form, the show did indeed go on, giving the fans (and FCW talent) something to write home about.

Following her Divas battle royal, AJ posted via Twitter: "Just wrestled 10 Divas in the rain and in what I can only believe was someone's dream sequence."

Meanwhile, FCW 15 champion Seth Rollins' post-show tweet read: "Wrestled in the pouring rain for the first time in my near seven-year career. It was awesome. Kind of made me realize I've been having a lot of fun in FCW ... I can't wait to take WWE and the world by storm."

FCW tag team champion Calvin Raines had a little different outlook, noting on his Facebook page ... "Nothing like wrestling in the pouring rain! It was more scary than fun ... definitely an interesting experience!"

Rollins and *NXT* Season 4 winner Johnny Curtis received a few shots at the tag titles held by Raines and Big E Langston throughout June, and in the heaviest squalls that night in Bradenton, Rollins teamed up with Los Aviadores (Hunico & Epico) to topple Raines, Langston, and Dean Ambrose (the former Jon Moxley).

They're taking the world by storm, indeed, but one has to wonder: Did Mother Nature interpret Norman Smiley's first "Big Wiggle" as FCW GM as a rain dance?

Rays of Sunshine. Raquel Diaz has begun accompanying Alexander Rusev to the ring. While Rusev has received mostly rave reviews so far for his work inside the squared circle, time will tell if Raquel interrupts any unfavorable quips by screaming her mother's famous "EXCUSE ME!" line ... Former Canadian Olympic hopeful Farhan Faruqui is training down in Tampa in hopes of landing a developmental deal. Faruqui, who just completed his first year in the business, is an accomplished grappler who speaks three languages—a potentially important factor as WWE expands its global pursuits ... WWE's seemingly annual summer roster purge hit FCW this year, with Buddy Stetcher, Ethan Levin, Buck Dixon, and Jacob Novak getting their releases. Levin was profiled in our last issue as the first Israeli wrestler signed to a WWE deal, and his release was a surprise to many in the know—as was that of Novak, a two-time veteran of *NXT*.

And Finally ... We would be remiss if we didn't wish a very happy birthday to FCW, which, in its current form, turned four on June 26. On that date in 2007, the first FCW show took place at the Dallas Bull in Tampa. Four years later, nearly half of the participants—including The Hart Dynasty, Ezekiel Jackson, and Kofi Kingston—have gone on to make a big mark in WWE. □

BACK ISSUES OF the Wrestler

When we recently moved to a new warehouse facility, we uncovered many back issues of THE WRESTLER that haven't been available to the public for years! Supplies are limited, so order today!

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Aug. 1981: Ted DiBiase: "Now I Know I Can Defeat Harley Race." Also: Mr. Wrestling II-Assassins, Dusty Rhodes, Sgt. Slaughter, Austin Idol, Blackwell-Gagne, Valentine-Bravo, Rick Martel, Bobby Eaton.

April 1982: How Jack Brisco Controls Ric Flair's Championship Destiny. Also: Pedro Morales, Eric Embry, Tito Santana, Valentine-Atlas, Roop-DiBiase, Armstrongs, John Studd.

July 1982: Harley Race—His Destiny Is In The Hands Of Tommy Rich. Also: Rick Steamboat, Chief Jay Strongbow, Buzz Sawyer, Ric Flair, Roddy Piper.

Aug. 1982: Nick Bockwinkel: "Tommy Rich Is Too Stupid To Be Champion!" Also: Putski-Adonis, Blackjack Mulligan Jr., Roddy Piper, Rick Steamboat, Lawler-Kaufman, Mike Graham.

Nov. 1982: Clash Of The Titans—Backlund vs. Flair: Who's Better? Also: Putski & Snuka, Roddy Piper, Brian Blair, Chick Donovan, scaffold matches.

May 1983: What Will Happen When The Samoans Become Too Smart For Capt. Lou Albano? Also: Tommy Rich, Terry Allen, Eddie Gilbert, Kerry-Race, Ladd & Rhodes, Flair-Orndorff.

July 1983: Ric Flair: "I Wrestle The Men Backlund Is Afraid Of." Also: Putski-Adonis, Kevin Sullivan, Bob Roop, Martel-Heenan.

Oct. 1983: Record-Breaking Seventh Title Reign: Harley Race Defeats Ric Flair For The NWA Title. Also: Ron Bass, Mr. Olympia-Mr. Wrestling II, Sawyer-Murdoch, Ann Gunkel, Briscos, Dillon-Mosca, Frank Tunney.

Dec. 1983: The Night The AWA World Title Was Stolen From Mil Mascaras. Also: Roddy Piper, Larry Zbyszko, Dino Bravo, Fabulous Ones, Garvin & Sunshine.

March 1984: Is Tito Santana Trying To Blackmail The WWF? Also: Wayne & Sawyer, Hogan-Race, David Von Erich, Jesse Ventura.

May 1985: The Road Warriors vs. Dusty Rhodes & Manny Fernandez: Exclusive Coverage Of The Historic Tag Team Superbowl! Also: Al-Kaissie-Gagne, Backlund-Race, Haynes-Kamala, Tito Santana.

July 1985: It's A Dog's Life ... And Junkyard Dog Wouldn't Trade It With Anyone! Also: Backlund-Martel, Kernodle-Koloff, Butch Reed, Hernandez & Sunshine, Mike Graham.

Oct. 1985: David Shultz Gets An NWA Title Shot: Ric Flair—"I Wrestle The Men Hulk Hogan Is Afraid Of!" Also: Misty Blue, Rick Martel, Kendall Windham, George Steele, Killer Brooks, all-time top 10.

July 1986: How King Kong Bundy Became The WWF's Most Hated Man. Also: Lex Luger, Nikita Koloff-Billy Graham, The Fabulous Ones, Ric Flair, Rick Martel.

Jan. 1987: Bobby Heenan's Bitter Crusade To Destroy Hulk Hogan. Also: Borne & Sawyer, Garvins, Ted DiBiase, Misty Blue Simmes.

Feb. 1987: Tragedy Strikes Wrestling: Magnum T.A. Needs Your Prayers Now More Than Ever. Also: Roberts-Steamboat, Crusher Yurkof, Terry Gordy, Wendell Cooley.

March 1987: Ivan & Khrushchev's Kremlin Orders: Crush Nikita Koloff's Russian Revolution! Also: Barry Windham, One Man Gang, Brian Adias, Savage-Steamboat, Jimmy Snuka.

Dec. 1987: Hulk Hogan: Will He Be Drowned By The New Wave Of Challengers? Also: Hennig-Lawler, Windham-Steiner, Flair-Williams, Brutus Beefcake, Ronnie Garvin.

Jan. 1988: The Experts Agree: The Road Warriors Will Turn Bad In 1988! Also: Koloff-Taylor, Curt Hennig, Duggan-DiBiase.

May 1988: Belt Or No Belt ... Hulk Hogan Is Still The People's Champion! Also: Owen Hart, Tatum & Victory, Scott Hall, Madusa Miceli, Luger-Arn.

June 1988: How Sting's War With Ric Flair Could Make Him A Horseman! Also: Bobby Heenan, Martel-Zenk, Kerry-Gordy, Ted DiBiase, Nikita Koloff.

Aug. 1988: World Tag Title Power Shift! Also: Windham & Luger, Demolition, Taylor-Freebirds, Paul Ellering, Owen & Bret.

March 1989: Scared Stiff! "Don't Say Snake!" Also: Jeff Jarrett, Cactus Jack, Ric Flair, Bam Bam Bigelow, Hercules, Iron Sheik.

May 1989: Rick Steamboat—Champion; Rick Steamboat—Challenger: Which Is Better? Also: Sid Vicious, Dusty Rhodes, Savage-Hogan, Samoan Swat Team, Wendi Richter.

June 1989: Ultimate Warrior's Mission Impossible: Destroy Randy Savage For Hulk Hogan. Also: Rick Steamboat, Rick Martel, Larry Zbyszko, Luger-Windham by Sting, Ric Flair.

July 1989: Dino Bravo: The Man Hulk Hogan Cannot Beat! Also: Flair-Steamboat, Rhodes & Perez, Road Warriors & Ellering, Michael Hayes.

Dec. 1989: Gary Hart: "Muta Took The Sting Out Of Sting!" Also: Ken Patera, Larry Zbyszko, Skyscrapers, Andre & Ultimate Warrior, Barry Windham, Rock 'n' Roll Express.

Jan. 1990: The Hulk Hogan Book Of Lists. Also: Brian Pillman, Rich-Luger, Tully & Arn, P.Y. Chu-Hi, Greg Gagne.

April 1990: Hulk Hogan: A Decade Of Greatness. Also: Luger-Flair, Woman, Piper-Heenan, Billy Travis, Badd Company.

July 1990: My 10 Challenges To Ric Flair, By Lex Luger. Also: Lanny Poffo, Dusty-Savage, Luger-Flair, Doom, Tully Blanchard.

Sept. 1990: The Ultimate Warrior Wimps Out! Why He Won't Wrestle Hulk Hogan. Also: Billy Jack Haynes, Lex Luger, Doom-Steiners, Tugboat, Kerry-Borne.

Oct. 1990: Hulk Hogan vs. Earthquake: Exclusive SummerSlam Preview & Analysis. Also: Ultimate Warrior, Ric Flair, Tommy Rich, Tasmanian Devil, Chris Von Erich.

Dec. 1990 (Special Issue): SummerSlam! Exclusive Full-Color Coverage! Also: Stan Hansen, Arn Anderson, Ultimate Warrior, Vic Steamboat, Scott Putski.

Feb. 1991: The Incredible "Halloween Havoc Hoax"! Unraveling The Diabolical Plot. Also: Muta-Steamboat, Hogan-Hart, Ultimate Warrior, Cornette & Express, Norman.

March 1991: Warning To The Ultimate Warrior: Roddy Piper Wants You! Also: Gilbert-Jarrett, Cornette & Express, Teddy Long, Survivor Series, Scott Norton.

April 1991: Hulk Hogan: The Challenges That Remain. Also: Ted DiBiase, Skyscrapers, Lex Luger, Tom Zenk, Fabulous Ones.

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June 1991: How Much Longer Can We Depend On Hulk Hogan? Also: Nasty Boys, Sting, Flair-Gigante, Cactus Jack, Kevin Von Erich.

July 1991: Can Ric Flair Shatter The "Myth" Of Japanese Superiority? Also: Embry & Prichard, LOD-Nastys, Steiners, Savage & Elizabeth.

Aug. 1991: If Sgt. Slaughter Said "I'm Sorry" ... Would Hulk And The World Forgive Him? Also: Luger-Nikita, Hennig-Davey Boy, Lanny Poffo, Bam Bam Bigelow.

Nov. 1991: Lex Luger Wins The Title—But Loses His Fans. Also: Rick Steamboat, Roddy Piper, Global, Diamond Studd, Lawler-Embry.

Jan. 1992: The LOD's Championship Catastrophe: Overpowered By The Natural Disasters. Also: Johnny B. Badd, Mr. Hughes, Jake Roberts, Ronnie Gossett.

Feb. 1992: Shocking WWF Report: McMahon Offers Bounty On Flair—Will Vince Pay The Piper? Also: Ron Simmons, Tito Santana, Bob Backlund, R. Steiner-Abdullah.

March 1992: After Survivor Series & Tuesday In Texas: Has The WWF Title Suffered Irreparable Damage? Also: Brian Pillman, Anderson & Bruiser, Rude-Sting, Mountie-Hart, Jeff Jarrett.

April 1992: After A Year Of Tragedy & Turmoil: The Magic Is Back In WCW! Also: Chris Candido, Paul Orndorff, Lady X, Paul Bearer, Hennig & Flair, Michaels & Jannetty.

July 1992: "Number Two Just Won't Do" For Rick Rude, The U.S. Belt Means Failure. Also: Greg Valentine, Madusa, Gorilla Monsoon, Legion of Doom, Nurse Vanessa.

Aug. 1992: The Ultimate Warrior: WrestleMania's Accidental Hero. Also: Bunkhouse matches, Undertaker-Roberts, Sting, JYD, Rob Van Dam.

Sept. 1992: Hey, Legion Of Doom—Go For The Title Or Go Away! Also: Repo-Crush, Mondo Kleen, Freebirds-Valentine & Taylor, Dangerous Alliance, Moondogs.

Nov. 1992: WWF Beware! It's The Perfect Time For A Curt Hennig Comeback! Also: Crush, Butch Reed, Sting, Buddy Rogers, Dan Spivey.

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Dec. 1992: He's *Baaaaaack!* Jake Roberts Slithers Into WCW. Also: Paul E. Dangerously, Ron Simmons, Hulk Hogan, Michaels-Martel, Gilberts-Rock 'n' Rolls.

Jan. 1993: Sting Turns Sadistic: "Hurting Jake Makes Me Happy!" Also: Anderson & Eaton, Bushwhackers-Moondogs, Ramon-Savage, Natural Disasters, Masa Chono.

Feb. 1993: WWF Champion Bret Hart: His Five Most Dangerous Challenges. Also: Sgt. Slaughter, Steve Austin, Rick Steiner, Bob Backlund, Terry Taylor.

March 1993 (Special Issue): 1992—The Year In Pictures. Also: Madusa-Paul E., Curt Hennig, Davey Boy Smith, Jesse Ventura, Predictions For '93.

April 1993 What's In? What's Out? Also: Razor Ramon, Rick Steamboat, Patriot, Tatanka, Brian Christopher.

May 1993: Sumo Sadism: Will Yokozuna Make His Biggest Splash At WrestleMania? Also: Jim Cornette, Christopher-Jarrett, Benoit-Scorpio, Windham & Rhodes, Hennig-Luger.

Nov. 1993: Bret Hart vs. Lex Luger: It's Not Over Yet! Also: Rude-Dustin, Hulk Hogan, Marty Jannetty, Heavenly Bodies, Tatanka, Sherri Martel.

May 1994: Aftershocks! How The Royal Rumble Shook Up WrestleMania. Also: Hulk Hogan, Boss, Douglas-Sherri, Patriot, improve WCW.

July 1994: Ric Flair vs. Hulk Hogan: We Preview The Inevitable Battle. Also: Dreamer-Snuka, Jim Crockett's WWN, Ted DiBiase, Shane Douglas, Terra Ryzing.

Aug. 1994: Bret's Nightmare Team Becomes A Reality: Owen Hart & Yokozuna. Also: Cactus-Vader, MOM, Flair-Badd, Nasty Boys, Luna Vachon.

Sept. 1994 (Special Issue): WWF Midyear Report! Also: Big Van Vader, Parker-Hollywood Blonds, Sting-Rude, WWF legal problems, Prince Kharis, Bunkhouse-Rhodes, Public Enemy.

Nov. 1994: Hulk Hogan's New Commandments: Say Prayers, Take Vitamins ... And Kick Butt! Also: Owen-Bret, Lord Steven Regal, Johnny B. Badd, Jerry Lawler, Mikey Whipwreck.

Jan. 1995: Our Holiday Wish List For 1995. Also: Johnny B. Badd, DiBiase-Tatanka, Bob Backlund, PG-13, Hacksaw Duggan.

Feb. 1995: Hulk's A Maniac! Why Vader Should Be Deathly Afraid Of Hogan. Also: Honky Tonk Man, Sabu-Dangerously, Skaaland-Luger, Steiners, Patriot-Bagwell, Undertaker-Vicious.

April 1995: Imagine Wrestling Today If ... Also: Gunn & Smothers, Harlem Heat, Money Inc., Lawler-Cornette.

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July 1995: Hulk Hogan's Contract With America. Also: Marty Jannetty, Brian Pillman, Lawrence Taylor, Bill Dundee.

Oct. 1995: President Backlund?! Also: Steiners, Austin & Pillman, Miss Texas, Gordon Solie.

Nov. 1995: "Take That—And Shut Up!" If Savage Can't Silence Flair, He's Through! Also: Mabel, Jarrett-Ramon, Renegade, WWF legends roundtable.

Winter 1995: Exclusive Preview: Sting vs. Hogan: This Time It's For Real! Also: Steiners, Yankem-Undertaker, Bodies-Cornette, Arn Anderson.

Nov. 1996: Brian Pillman: Next WWF Champ! Also: Giant-Sting, Ray Stevens, Dick Murdoch, Cloudy, John Tenta, WCW shuffle.

Jan. 1997: It Could Happen! Hogan's Next Move ... Buy WCW! Also: Undertaker, New Jack, Owen-Bulldog, Ted DiBiase.

Feb. 1997: Wrestling's Top Stars: What 1997 Has In Store For Them! Also: Michaels-Hart, Pit Bull I, Rey Mysterio Jr., Kevin Nash.

May 1997: Hogan's Headache: The Pain Is Piper! And The Remedy Is Revenge! Also: Michaels-Hart, Guerreros, J.C. Ice, gang violence, Marc Mero.

Nov. 1997: 10-Year Grudge! Lex Luger's Career Ruined By J.J. Dillon? Also: Shawn-Bret, Jeff Jarrett, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, Dreamer-Raven, Dan Severn.

Hol. 1997: First Owen ... Then 'Taker ... Then Hogan: Who's Gonna Go Next? Also: Steve Austin, Bret Hart, Lex Luger, Ric Flair, Dean Malenko.

March 1998 (Special Issue): 1997—The Year In Pictures. Also: The Road Warruiors, Rey Mysterio Jr., Undertaker, The Giant.

April 1998: "We've Won!" Maybe ... But Can The NWO Handle Its Own Success? Also: Ken Shamrock, Steiners-Warriors, Douglas & Francine, Rocky Maivia.

June 1998: Hollywood Hogan: 10 More Dirty Deeds ... And Then He's Outta Here! Also: DeGeneration X, Jim Cornette, Randy Savage, yesterday and today.

July 1998: Death Wish! Costing Hogan The Title Isn't Enough For The Macho Man: What's Next? Also: Ric Flair, Headbangers-Rock 'n' Rolls, Chris Chetti, Mero & Sable.

Aug. 1998: We Stand Behind Ya, Vince! It's Time To Fire Austin. Also: Luna-Sable, Randy Savage, Dean Malenko, Super 8 tourney.

Sept. 1998 (Special Issue): WWF Midyear Report. Also: Nash-Hogan, Rocky Maivia, Bill Goldberg, Antonio Inoki.

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Hol. 1998: "Quit, Mick!" A Desperate Plea From A Distraught Wife. Also: Chris Jericho, Jason Sensation, wrestlers vs. celebrities, hardcore war.

Jan. 1999: Stone-Cold's Personal Survivor Series. Also: Rock-HHH, NWA, Bret Hart, Howard Finkel, three-way title matches.

Feb. 1999: Hot Rocks! The Anger That Drives Shamrock & The Rock. Also: McMahon-Austin, Spike Dudley, Eric Bischoff, Perry Saturn.

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Oct. 1999: Shawn Michaels' Game Of Corporate Chess! Are The McMahons His Pawns? Also: Steiners, Billy Gunn, Savage & George.

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Hol. 1999: Before The WWF Can Sell ... Read What They Had To Tell! Also: Kanyon, Big Show, Spike & Mahoney-Axl & New Jack, Kevin Nash.

Feb. 2000: When Will Mankind Finally Tell The Rock ... "Put A Sock In It"? Also: Goldberg, Chris Jericho, Sabu, Harlem Heat.

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July 2000: Tori/Torrie, What's The Story? How They Rank In 10 Crucial Categories. Also: Big Show, Tank Abbott, Too Cool, Rhodes-Dreamer, Jeff Jarrett.

Aug. 2000: We're Con-Vinced! This Attack Saved The WWF! Also: Lex Luger, Radicals, Sandman & Rhino, Cyrus.

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March 2001: Triple-H & The Rock: 10 Reasons They Should Trust Each Other ... 10 Reasons They Should Not! Also: Scott Steiner, Chris Candido, Rob Van Dam, McMahon-ECW, Steven Richards, WCW factions.

May 2001: Do Anything You Want, Stone-Cold: We Can't Hate You. Also: Kronic, Rikishi, Steve Corino, Goldberg, Edge & Christian, Kane.

July 2001: Jerichoholics Beware! Serious Withdrawal Symptoms Are In Store! Also: Tajiri, Steph-Test, Undertaker, Mike Awesome, WCW Elite, Albert.

Sept. 2001: The Rock's Choice: Honor Over Glory! Also: WrestleMania X-Seven, Undertaker-Triple-H, Shane-WCW, TCL II, Scott Hall, Vince McMahon, Chris Jericho.

Nov. 2001: Goldberg! Da Man Who Could Make Or Break Wrestling! Also: Dudleys, Steve Corino, Chris Benoit, Dusty Rhodes, Lita, WWF top tier.

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March 2002: Outsiders Looking In! Hall & Nash Take Aim At The WWF! Also: Ivory, Austin-Angle, Christian-Edge, what's ahead in '02.

May 2002: Ric Flair: 10 Reasons He Terrifies Vince McMahon. Also: Undertaker, Jeff Hardy, Survivor Series, S.A.T., report cards.

July 2002: Hail The NWO ... But Don't Forget The N-W-Woes! Also: Edge, Billy & Chuck, Leviathon, Jericho-Flair, Goldust.

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March 2003: The WrestleMania XIX We Want To See! Also: Terry Funk, Rey Mysterio Jr., Nidia, NWA-TNA, what's ahead in '03.

May 2003: A Permanent Replacement For The Rock? Book It! Also: Smackdown, Joanie & Syxx-Pac, Raw report cards, Shawn Michaels, Victoria.

July 2003: In Tune With Steve Austin—A Comprehensive Guide To Stone-Cold's Red-Hot Comeback. Also: Kurt Angle, Amazing Red, The Sheik, Bill DeMott, Al Snow, Ric Flair.

Nov. 2003: The Women Of Wrestling—Do We Expect Too Much From Their Bodies? Also: AJ Styles, Freddie Blassie, Goldberg, Stacy Keibler, evolution of wrestling.

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March 2004: McMahon vs. McWoman: How Vince vs. Stephanie Nearly Ruined WWE! Also: Flair & Dusty, Eric Angle, Jeff Jarrett, Shannon Moore, what's ahead in '04.

July 2004: Stop Right There! RVD Won't Let The Young Studs Pass Him By! Also: Jonny Fairplay, Walters-Xavier, HHH-HBK.

Oct. 2004: Austin, Lesnar, Goldberg: We Know Who'll Be Back First. Also: AJ. Styles, Eugene, Rene Dupree, mid-year report.

Jan. 2005: Evolving Beyond Evolution: It's Time For Randy Orton To Be A Man! Also: Rey Mysterio Jr., Kane-Lita, Ron Killings, La Resistance, Eugene-Helmsley, Trish-Victoria, Kurt Angle, WWE mid-carders.

April 2005: PPV Revolution: How Taboo Tuesday & Victory Road Changed Wrestling Forever. Also: Eddie Guerrero, Jushin Liger, Edge-Benoit, Kane-Snitsky, TNA vs. ROH, Heyman & Heidenreich, Charlie Haas, WWE pink slips.

June 2005: Chokehold On America: Have Hassan & Daivari Put Us In A No-Win Situation? Also: Sabu, Edge, Shelton Benjamin, ECW, report cards.

Oct. 2005: Big Fish Trish: Will She Drown In Her Little Pond? Also: Guerrero & Mysterio, Matt Hardy, Batista, mid-year report.

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THUMBS UP

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Thumbs Up to Brian Kendrick. Kendrick did TNA a solid by defeating Abyss for the X division title at Destination X. By reclaiming the strap and upending Abyss, Kendrick in some ways proved that Abyss, and other wrestlers of his size and style, have no business competing in a division that was intended to showcase the agility of wrestlers closer to Kendrick's size. Now that Kendrick's the X champion, he can help ensure that only true X division-style wrestlers compete in that bracket. Hopefully, Kendrick will not give Abyss a rematch.

Photo by George Napolitano

Thumbs Up to Daniel Bryan. For somebody who has made his name on the independent circuit, it would have been easy for Bryan to fall apart at the first signs of adversity under the glare of the WWE spotlight. However, if Bryan is having any problems, it hasn't been reflected in his recent performances. Whether he's wrestling Ted DiBiase Jr. on a house show or battling Sheamus on the *Smackdown* semi-main event, all reports are that Bryan is consistently turning in show-stealing efforts. And some people thought he'd never make it in WWE …

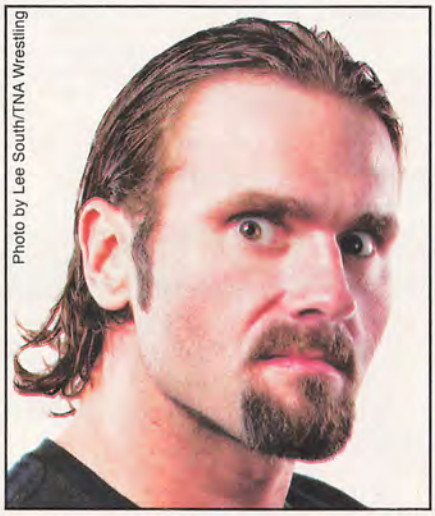
Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Thumbs Up to Gunner. Only a small portion of TNA fans know Gunner as Phill Shatter, one of the most accomplished indy wrestlers in the world. Even those who knew of his resume, however, had to be surprised when the former member of the unheralded Gunner and Murphy tandem recently started pinning top stars such as AJ Styles, Sting, and Ken Anderson (the latter two while they actually held the TNA World title). If fans were reluctant to get behind the big man before, they must now be falling in line. Any room left on the bandwagon?

Photo by George Tahinos

Thumbs Up to Austin Aries. Things hadn't been going so smoothly for "A-Double" in recent times. Months ago, he was let go by Ring of Honor in a cost-cutting measure. Then he was turned away by the *Tough Enough* staff in a bid to earn a WWE contract. Instead of hanging his head or allowing himself to fade into obscurity, Aries put on some scintillating performances for a variety of independent promotions, keeping his name and reputation strong. Before long, TNA expressed an interest in him and Aries parlayed it into a contract. If ever there were a lesson to be taught about not quitting on your dreams, Aries personifies it.

THUMBS DOWN

Photo by George Napolitano

Thumbs Down to Alberto Del Rio. For all the talk about his cars, and his career accomplishments in Mexico, and his destiny, we have to wonder when Del Rio will live up to at least some of his own hype and do something meaningful in WWE. His personality, while grating, was much more sufferable when he was challenging for world titles and winning key matches such as The Royal Rumble. Lately, though, Del Rio has not been winning many matches at all, and now all his self-aggrandizing seems like nothing more than hot air, which is the last thing we need during the summer months.

Photo by Scott Finkelstein

Thumbs Down to Kevin Steen. Steen is an excellent wrestler and quite a personality, but his behavior at the ROH Best in the World card in New York on June 26 was reprehensible. What made his conduct all the more galling was the disingenuous manner in which he initially attempted to win sympathy from the crowd. Feigning contrition for his past actions against fan favorite El Generico, Steen suddenly did an about face and began disrespecting the promotion that helped him establish his name. It is only fitting that Generico left the event with the TV title around his waist, while Steen left with a lifetime ban.

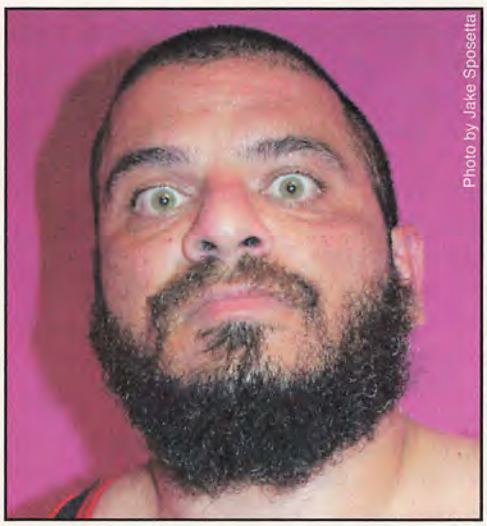
Photo by Jake Sposetta

Thumbs Down to The Sheik. Sometimes it seems as if some fans actually enjoy pointing out how far the NWA has fallen from its glory days. The NWA is fighting hard to change that perception, so when The Sheik refused to defend the heavyweight title against Adam Pearce, company President Bob Trobich wasted little time in stripping him of the belt. Ironically, The Sheik had been very vocal about NWA matchmakers making him wait for a title shot because they feared for their heavyweight champions when he was a challenger. Maybe The Sheik doesn't realize what the NWA title represents or maybe the concept of a fighting champion eludes him. In any case, stripping him of the championship was the right move to make.

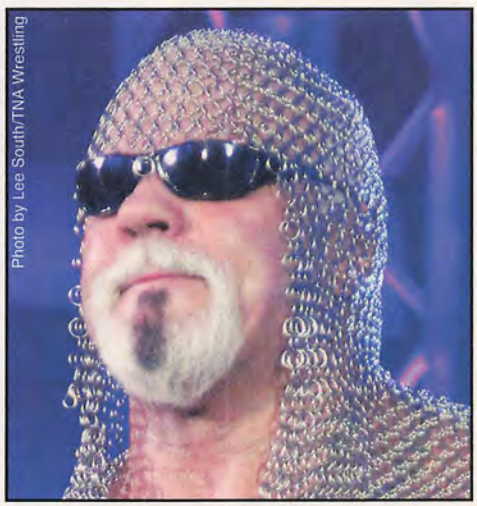
Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Thumbs Down to Scott Steiner. Everybody understands that "Big Poppa Pump" is in the homestretch of a long career. The real question is how he stands to benefit from aligning with Hulk Hogan and Eric Bischoff once again as a member of Immortal. Sure, Steiner has flip-flopped so many times between fan favorite and villain over the years that it has been tough to keep tabs on him. But for some reason, since Steiner resurfaced in TNA late last year to come to the aid of Kurt Angle and Crimson, it just felt different. We thought he'd stay in our good graces. Maybe we should get the "thumbs down."

POINT:

JOHN CENA DID THE RIGHT THING BY FORCING VINCE TO REINSTATE CM PUNK

BY AL ALVEN

REMEMBER WHEN JIM ROSS used to refer to The Undertaker as "The Conscience of WWE"?

WWE announcers will still use that sobriquet on occasion when 'Taker returns from one of his sabbaticals. But, the nickname doesn't really apply to him anymore. Unofficially, wrestlers like Hulk Hogan, "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin, and The Rock wielded such responsibility (or, at least, a share of it) in different eras. These days, along with his status as the industry's top star, John Cena is perhaps the only man in WWE capable of truly keeping Vince McMahon in check.

Granted, The Chairman's appearances on television have become more sporadic over the past few years. But, when Vince decides to make his presence felt, it's almost *always* an event. He doesn't drop in just to say "Hi" to the fans. He shows up to make major announcements, commemorate milestones, introduce new concepts, etc. As we've learned over the years, McMahon can be a walking, fire-breathing contradiction at times—a brilliant businessman whose judgment is far from infallible.

Often stoked by his massive ego, he will allow personal feelings or vendettas to influence his decisions. And, when he doesn't act in the best interests of the fans or his company, someone might have to step in and let him know.

Cena did just that when he essentially shamed Vince into reinstating CM Punk, after "The Straight Edge Superstar" was suspended for his now-infamous anti-McMahon/WWE rant on *Raw*.

Simply put, Cena did the right thing. And, for that, he deserves some praise. Cena continued what is an essential tradition of WWE's biggest stars standing up to Vince. This dynamic really is all about checks and balances. History has shown that when Vince is allowed to act totally unfettered, he sometimes becomes "McMadman," and bad things usually happen.

Forget for a moment Cena's popularity and all that he's accomplished in the ring. If Cena allowed Punk to miss out on the WWE championship opportunity at the Money in the Bank pay-per-view that he legitimately earned, his integrity as champion would have been compromised.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, Cena's actions resulted in the fans getting what they wanted.

Let's face it, both Cena and Punk are polarizing figures. Punk has a huge following and many wanted to see him take the title from Cena on his way out of WWE. Obviously, "The Champ" understood that fans wanted the match, and that giving it to them would be good for business.

Lastly, Cena stood up for CM Punk. Okay, maybe this was really just an unintended consequence of Cena standing up for the ideals of free speech, but, in spite of Punk and Cena's mutual dislike, Cena, befitting his role model image, did not allow his personal opinion of Punk to cloud his judgment. A lesser man would have simply looked the other way and dodged the threat to his title.

In the end, though, Cena proved his mettle by doing the right thing, even when his boss was inclined not to. Many wrongs could have materialized as a result of Vince's initial decision to suspend Punk. Fortunately, by virtue of his actions, Cena turned them all into one big right.

Al Alven is a contributing writer for THE WRESTLER.

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While it might seem odd that John Cena lobbied so hard to have CM Punk reinstated after his WWE suspension, Al Alven says Cena acted bravely in confronting Vince McMahon.

COUNTERPOINT:

CENA HAD NO BUSINESS CALLING OUT VINCE ON *RAW*

BY BRADY HICKS

THERE IS SOMETHING to be said for the importance of standing up to authority and ensuring that your voice is heard when the situation calls for it. I have no problem if John Cena sees one of his roles in WWE as being the guy who keeps Vince McMahon in check.

But in this situation, Cena should have backed off.

The guy who owns the company and signs all the paychecks has every right to make any decision he wants. Yes, Vince's actions are sometimes questionable. But, given the nature of Punk's rant, I don't think suspending him was beyond reason.

My problem stems from the popular understanding of freedom of speech. Punk's rant was clever, witty, and expertly delivered. The guy is an outstanding public speaker, no question, and his sentiment obviously struck a chord with a lot of people. Still, just because so many people enjoyed it does not mean it was the right thing to do. Punk violated a longstanding, unwritten rule within the industry. When you are handed a microphone, especially on your way out of a company, the promoter is putting his trust in you. When Punk violated that trust by deciding to bury McMahon and so many others, he immediately opened himself up to any and all consequences. In short, Punk had the suspension coming.

Predictably, Punk was soon portrayed as the victim by Internet scribes and, eventually, by Cena himself. Vince then caved in to Cena and reinstated Punk, meaning that the WWE championship match at Money in the Bank was still on. But, really, did he have any choice? By confronting McMahon, Cena put the man behind the biggest wrestling company on the planet in a no-win situation.

That's why I believe it's more than fair to question Cena's motives. My colleague suggests that Cena's dignity would have been questioned had he not challenged Punk's suspension. In my opinion, considering Cena's reputation for being such a devout company guy, I doubt anybody would have given his integrity a second thought—except for me and maybe a few of Punk's fans.

Finally, if it were so "essential" that Cena act to keep Vince in check, why is it not then equally important that Punk be held accountable for his actions? Vince has a company to protect. If he felt it was justifiable to suspend Punk after he dragged his name and company through the mud on a nationally televised show, then Vince is within his bounds as WWE Chairman to suspend him. Unlike some other sports and industries, the inmates do not run the asylum in WWE.

I would also like to point out that Punk did more than merely criticize McMahon and WWE. He threatened to leave with the WWE title and defend it in other promotions. Somebody with Punk's experience and sense knows that to make such public taunts is an all-time wrestling taboo. I guess what I'm saying is that voicing legitimate complaints is fine, but Punk took too much glee in twisting the knife he plunged into McMahon's back.

Cena isn't ignorant to the nuances of the wrestling industry. He knows that what Punk did was wrong, and he also knows that *any* promoter would have suspended Punk after such a treacherous display. Yet he chose to grandstand on Punk's behalf at the expense of the man who signs his checks.

Cena may have conned my colleague and the fans into thinking he was acting in the best interest of WWE, but with his WrestleMania 28 match against The Rock weighing so heavily on his mind, I feel it is entirely possible that "The Champ" was looking to curry early support with WWE fans by any means necessary, even if it meant forcing his boss into an ugly and humiliating position.

Brady Hicks is a contributing writer for THE WRESTLER.□

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Punk's critics claim that "The Straight Edge Superstar" actually enjoys taunting McMahon. Therefore, asserts Brady Hicks, Cena's support of Punk was either misguided or disingenuous, or both.

INTRODUCING

CHRIS WYLDE

Photo by Frank Krewda

IMAGINE THE TERROR of wrestling a match without knowing where your next breath is coming from. It's never happened to East Coast Wrestling Association Mid-Atlantic champion Chris Wylde in the ring, but the 28-year-old has horrible memories of debilitating asthma attacks as a child and always has to be prepared for the possibility of finding himself in a position where he is fending off an opponent while gasping for that precious lungful of air that will keep him alive.

Wylde has indeed flirted with death and he knows how frightening it can be. He recalls one particular incident that has stayed with him throughout his life. "I was at my step-brother's birthday party when I had this really bad asthma attack. I actually died in the ambulance, my heart stopped, but I was revived in the hospital."

That memory reminds Wylde to be prepared for the worst, but it also helps him remember to never let his illness get him down.

"I try to look at it like I'm a survivor, like I can accomplish anything," he said. "That's the message I want to send anytime I see a sick kid in the audience. I always want to pull him aside and tell him to never let the illness get to him. I've basically been able to shut my asthma out of my mind when wrestling."

To watch Wylde wrestle, nobody would ever suspect his affliction. Ironically, the 5'7", 180-pound Delaware native has blossomed into one of the most skilled aerialists on the independent circuit, and boasts a moveset

BY BRADY HICKS

that includes his "Wylde Thing" Swanton bomb, and Sliced Bread #1.

Predictably, many people close to Chris balked when he—then a 120-pound asthmatic—decided to train under Delaware star Jeff Rockor, himself a trainee of Simon Diamond (Pat Kenney), who had once wrestled for the ECWA. For Wylde, the moment had been surreal considering he grew up an avid fan of Jim Kettner's ECWA promotion.

"I was just a short kid with long hair, no different than so many other guys ... other than having to carry around an inhaler."

At that stage of his career, Wylde was wrestling just one weekend show per month. It was a period Wylde refers to as "a rut." It was not until a chance encounter with former Four Horsemen manager J.J. Dillon that Chris felt motivated to make something of his career.

"I was working at a prison in Smyrna, Delaware, and had heard that J.J. worked there as well," Wylde said. "When we finally got to talk, I got a lot of really great advice from him. It probably even saved my career."

On Dillon's advice, Wylde began hitting the gym and training regularly. He also reached out to Kettner about wrestling for the ECWA. Thanks to Dillon's influence, Wylde became more focused than ever on becoming the best wrestler he could be.

In May 2010, Wylde's hard work and patience paid off, as he finally got the call from Kettner that would launch his career: He was invited to participate in the 2010 Super 8 tournament.

Remembering how so many Super 8 alums went on to have successful careers in the national promotions, Chris was invigorated by the prospect of having the eyes of TNA, Ring of Honor, and WWE agents upon him.

Photo by Joe Zanolle

Chris Wylde goes to the air vs. Alex Reynolds in the first round of the 2010 ECWA Super 8 tourney. Becoming an ECWA wrestler was a huge accomplishment for Wylde, but now he's thinking even bigger.

Wylde fell short in the tourney, losing to Tommaso Ciampa in the second round, but was comforted by and grateful for a subsequent invitation to join the ECWA roster. He quickly moved up the ranks and was given an opportunity to wrestle Papadon for the ECWA title. Though he came up short, he was impressive enough to warrant additional chances and, perhaps, move to the next stage of his career.

"Wrestling for the ECWA has been a dream come true for me," said Wylde. "Now that I'm here, though, I have to admit, I'm always trying to dream a little bit bigger."

The "Heart Killer" recently participated in one of TNA's Gut Check training sessions in Asbury Park, New Jersey. When Chris and 11 of his indy-level peers arrived for the session, D-Lo Brown, Jeff Jarrett, and Jeremy Borash reminded them that it was at one of these sessions that they discovered Amazing Red and that the promotion was looking for big-time players. As daunting as that may have sounded, Wylde's confidence was buoyed by something else the TNA powerbrokers said. "They told us that we were actually one of the two best classes they'd ever had. Plus, D-Lo told me I really had the potential to make it with the company, and to never lose my faith. The experience, his words, all of it meant so much to me."

Wylde also credits Mickie James and Joey Mercury for providing encouragement and support throughout his career. "TNA could definitely use a guy like me," he said. "To an outsider, that might sound arrogant, but I would never have believed everything that has happened in my life to this point, considering I should probably be dead right now anyway." ☐

WORKIN' STIFF

BY AL CASTLE

I FANCY MYSELF something of a wrestling traditionalist. And, as such, I take special pride in writing for THE WRESTLER and the other Kappa Publishing wrestling magazines. That's not only because of the publications' rich history and respected brand, but because they remain one of the last bastions of wrestling's most important—and endangered—tenets: that "K" word.

To borrow from "The Crying Wrestling Fan" Dave Wills: It's still real to us, damn it.

Now, of course everyone here on our staff is privy to the "entertainment" side of pro wrestling—and we assume that most of you readers are, as well. But we also understand that for wrestling fans to maximize their enjoyment of this pastime, they must suspend their disbelief. To that end, we're here to occasionally lend a hand. And, in a world dominated by insider newsletters, websites, and podcasts, that's an increasingly rare service.

It's true that, to remain relevant, our magazines are required to occasionally delve into some of the inner workings of pro wrestling. But in most of my contributions I try to abide by a personal code. They are "fan favorites" and "rulebreakers," not "babyfaces" and "heels." It is a "sport," not a "business" or "industry." I try to write about the unique world of pro wrestling with a straight face, so that you can enjoy it with one.

Unfortunately, wrestlers and wrestling promoters sometimes needlessly do things that force fans to break that suspension of disbelief—and force this writer to break his code.

Perhaps never was such wrestling self-indulgence on display as it was early this summer, when both WWE and TNA attempted to create a buzz for their respective products by orchestrating so-called "worked shoots"—another term I'd prefer never to have to write in these pages.

For TNA, it was, sadly, nothing out of the ordinary. For years now—and especially since Hulk Hogan and Eric Bischoff arrived in the promotion in 2009—TNA has been obsessed with incorporating real-life situations in its on-air product. It seems nearly every word spouted by Bischoff and Hogan is some reference to behind-the-scenes politicking and power plays.

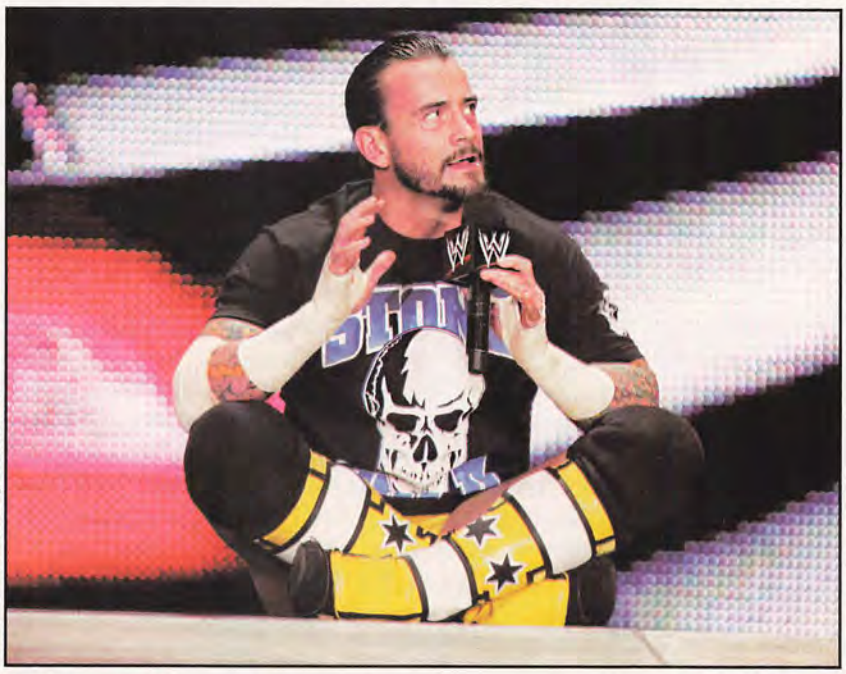
WWE has traditionally been more disciplined when it comes to breaking from the scripted content of its programs. That was until the June 27 edition of *Monday Night Raw*, which featured CM Punk giving a show-closing promo for the ages.

Punk, appearing to "go into business for himself" in the final days under contract to WWE, brought up such seemingly taboo subjects as Paul Heyman, Ring of Honor, Triple-H's marriage to Stephanie McMahon, and even (*gasp!*) Brock Lesnar. Just when Punk was about to bring up a "story" about Vince McMahon, his microphone cut off, and seconds later the screen faded to black.

The segment was seemingly successful in one respect. It got people talking. Social media lit up with buzz over Punk's groundbreaking promo. Even mainstream sports talk shows discussed it, wanting so desperately to believe that they had seen something that they were not supposed to have seen.

To be clear, they did not. That much was apparent the following week on *Raw* when Punk's allegedly unscripted promo became fodder for a typical WWE angle, complete with a highly produced video package at the start of the show.

Now, it's true that the Punk promo may have created enough intrigue to



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CM Punk's June 27 promo on *Raw* was heralded as groundbreaking throughout most of the industry. Our own Al Castle is not on board with that conventional viewpoint. He thinks worked-shoots are a bane to the overall health of the sport.

Photo by Scott Finkelstein

The Briscoes double-team Shelton Benjamin at Best in the World in New York City. Their sneak-attack on Wrestling's Greatest Tag Team at an ROH press conference in Baltimore two days earlier was, in Castle's eyes, wrestling theater as it ought to be.

generate a few more pay-per-view buys for Money in the Bank. And WWE so rarely goes down this path that maybe they deserve a pass for doing so this once. But the fact remains: "Worked shoots" are, in general, a very, very bad idea.

The reason is simple. Whenever a wrestling promotion goes out of its way to try to convince fans that one particular segment, angle, promo, or storyline is "real," it only brings to light the fact that everything else is not. That "everything else" includes the very matches that those segments, angles, promos, or storylines are supposed to be building toward.

For proof that such a strategy simply does not work, you need not look any further than TNA, for whom the constant barrage of "worked shoots" has never moved the needle of television ratings, live attendance, or general fan interest one millimeter.

It's not just that this strategy doesn't do any good—it actually does real harm. As we all know, the mainstream perception of pro wrestling is that its promoters and performers deliberately deceive their fans. In reality, most fans "get it." And, regardless of its predetermined nature, they enjoy wrestling for its entertainment value, just as movies are enjoyed by millions of people who know they are watching actors perform a script.

But when wrestling companies go out of their way to try to pass off something as legit that is not, they really are lying to their fans—fans who don't care one way or another whether what they're watching is real or not. They just want to be entertained.

Fortunately, while the number one and two wrestling promotions in the U.S. were busy trying to pull one over on their fans, the number three promotion was getting it right. At a Baltimore, Maryland, press conference in June announcing Sinclair Broadcasting's purchase of Ring of Honor, The Briscoe Brothers disrupted the event and confronted Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin, their next opponents. A riot nearly broke out in front of several members of the media in attendance. ROH officials later publicly chastised the Briscoes for their behavior.

ROH did not bother to point out that some parts of the press conference were more legitimate than others. Rather, the animosity between the feuding tag teams was treated with the same dignity and realism as the details of the corporate acquisition. It was all real—real entertaining, just the way it should be.

Now forget everything I just wrote, and enjoy the rest of this magazine. ☐

By Brock Lesnar
With Paul Heyman

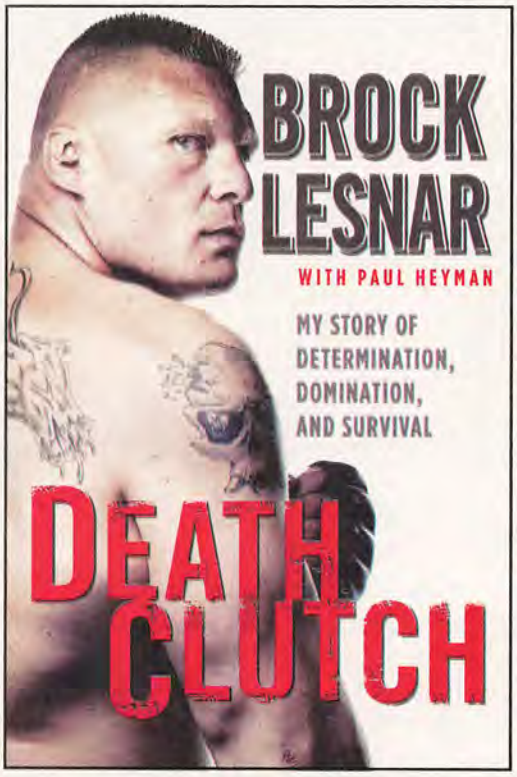
*[Editor's note: What follows is a combination of two chapters from **Death Clutch** that can be titled "Brock & The Rock."]*

I ONLY WRESTLED Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson three times. The first time was in Australia, right before we worked the SummerSlam main event at the Nassau Coliseum in Long Island, New York, for the Undisputed WWE championship. I had won the King of the Ring and was headed for my first pay-per-view main event. There's a lot of pressure on someone when they have to main-event with the top star of the day. You have to be careful not to hurt the Golden Goose, but you also have to make your match look good.

To get me ready for The Rock, we did a match on television against Hulk Hogan. This was a big deal because Hogan didn't wrestle every week on TV. WWE was portraying him as the legend of all legends, and to make me the focal point of the promotion, we were going to do a major incident on television where I took Hulk Hogan out. I was honored to get into the ring with Hogan, but at the same time, I looked at things a little differently from everyone else. Yes, Hogan was the biggest star of the '80s and '90s. He drew huge gates and sold millions of pay-per-views. This guy had made more money than any other wrestler of his era, but here he was, squeezing out another run at age fiftysomething ... just like Ric Flair.

So we did this deal with Hulk Hogan where I took Hogan out violently on the WWE *Smackdown* TV show. I knew the script because Paul was the lead writer of the show, and we communicated all the time. Vince kept telling me we needed to make this as memorable a night as possible for the fans because this was a big moment in my career. I was going to slay the immortal Hulk Hogan, bust him open, and leave him for dead. Other wrestlers had "jumped" Hogan from behind before, or "attacked" him to build interest in an upcoming match, but I was going to beat the crap out of him face-to-face. Vince didn't just want me to "get over," he wanted me over the top. There was a lot riding on that SummerSlam pay-per-view, and WWE was counting on a big buy rate to carry the promotion into the fall.

The Rock was a proven commodity, but putting a rookie in the main event of your second biggest show of the year was a risk. Vince liked to take chances in life, but he called them "calculated risks." The idea was to really pump up the interest in my match with The Rock by having me hit Hulk Hogan with the F-5, crack him over the head with a chair, bust his head open, and wipe his blood across my chest like Brock the Conqueror. It was pretty dramatic stuff. Vince figured if that didn't position me as a top star with the WWE audience, and give me the boost and credibility needed to draw some serious money with The Rock at SummerSlam, nothing would.



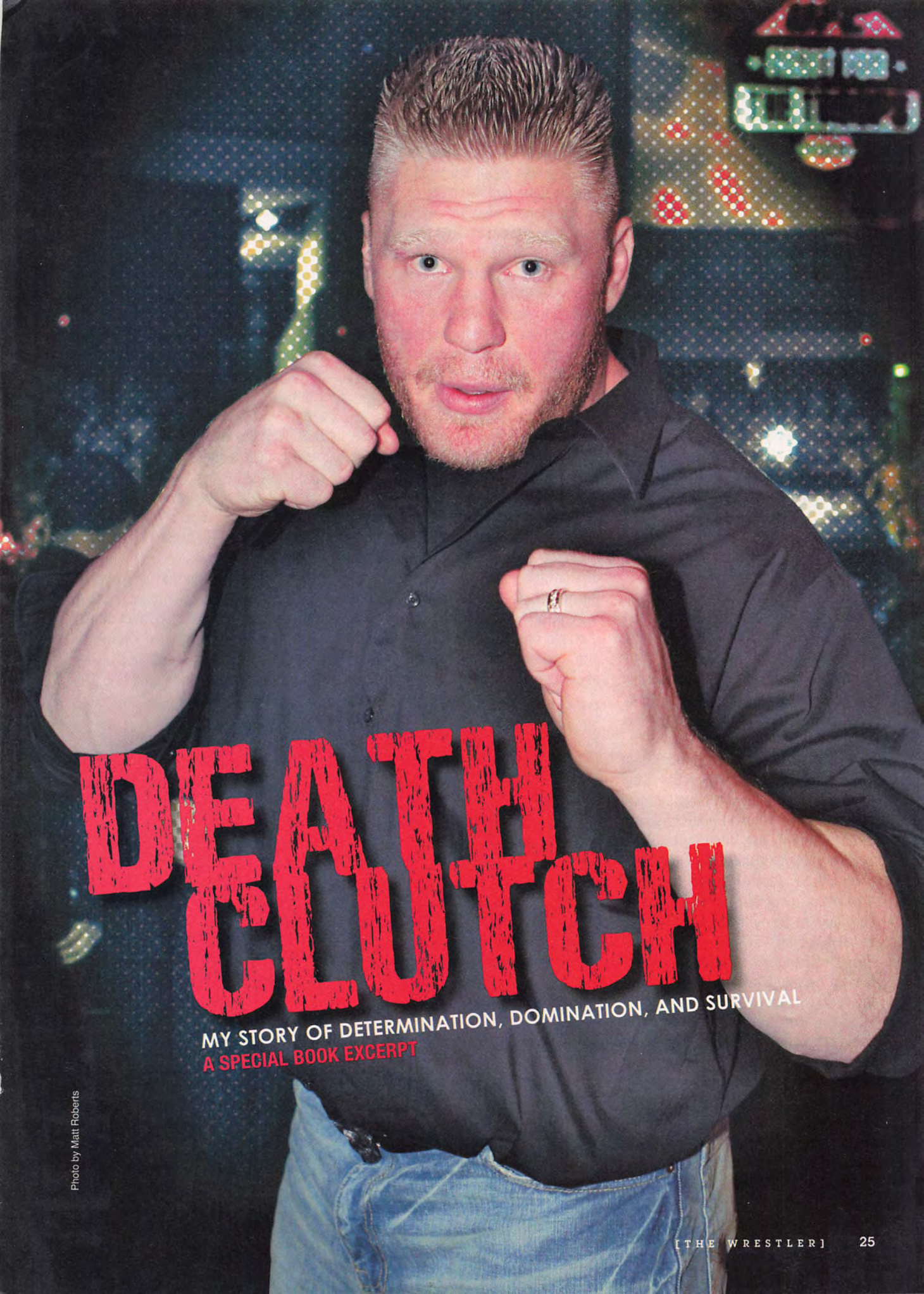
Behind the scenes, Hogan was being written out of the future scripts, and he wasn't going to appear at the Australia show. With no Hogan to work the main event Down Under, it gave me and Dwayne a chance to work with each other for the first time, and to feel each other out before we got in the ring with everyone watching at SummerSlam. We were in Melbourne doing a triple-threat match (three wrestlers in the ring at the same time), with The Rock defending his Undisputed WWE heavyweight championship against both me and HHH.

When Dwayne and I got in the ring together, we could both tell that we had instant chemistry. I know we stole the show. Everyone could immediately tell we were going to be big box office against each other. It was a week-and-a-half before SummerSlam, and we were ready.

WWE needed a new champion because Dwayne was taking time off after the show to do a movie, so the key here was to go all the way with this kid, Brock Lesnar, because I had to carry the load for the company while Dwayne was off shooting films. Not everyone has what it takes to sell tickets on a nightly basis at major arenas, and sell millions of dollars worth of pay-per-views several times a year. That's what a champion does. Vince thought I had what it took to pull that off.

Dwayne, of course, is a very smart guy. He was going to have his character, The Rock, do a clean job for me because he wanted to grease the wheels for himself to come back when the time was right. Dwayne knew putting me over was right for business, and he was willing to take a loss for the team, on pay-per-view, in front of all of his fans. He saw the talent I had, and he knew it would be best for the company if there were no questions in the fans' minds that I beat him "fair and square." That way, after I had my ride at the top, he could beat me in a revenge match when he came back and he would look even better. It would be huge. WWE would make a lot of money. I'd make a lot of money. Dwayne would make a lot of money. That's the pro wrestling business at its best!

Dwayne also knew that it wasn't only right for business to put me over clean, but that Vince had it in his own head that The Rock should lose clean to Brock Lesnar. If Dwayne wanted the door open for a return, he had to keep Vince happy, and have him think that "Dwayne always gave back to the com-



DEATH CLUTCH

MY STORY OF DETERMINATION, DOMINATION, AND SURVIVAL

A SPECIAL BOOK EXCERPT

Photo by Matt Roberts

pany, looked after what was right for business." Vince has ended more than one career when someone crossed him and put their own interests above the company's. Dwayne was too smart for that, and he did everything the right way ... the smart way.

I don't know how many other guys Dwayne would have been happy to lose to clean, but he did it for me because he knew I could carry the torch for the company until he got it back. It wasn't a gift. It was business.

On August 25, 2002, at age 25, I became the youngest WWE Champion in history when I "defeated" The Rock for the title at SummerSlam.

***

That night changed my life forever. I was now in a position to regularly score big paydays for a night's work, and more. I was now able to buy a lot of things. I'll always appreciate what Dwayne did for me and my family. If he hadn't made me look good, things might have been a lot different.

Beating The Rock at SummerSlam 2002 made me a true superstar in the eyes of the fans. I didn't have just any title, I had the ultimate prize in sports entertainment, the Undisputed WWE heavyweight championship of the world. I wasn't just another guy in the locker room, or a curtain-jerker, or a mid-card guy, or a guy hoping and praying to catch a break. I was the main event. People paid to see me. And that's exactly what I wanted, because that's where the serious money kicks in.

In my first-ever pay-per-view in some city I can't remember, I beat Jeff Hardy in an undercard match and got what I thought at the time was a decent check. Now I was headlining pay-per-views, and making life-changing money every time. Not a bad night's work. And it all literally happened overnight. Ten minutes in the ring with Jeff Hardy was really cool. But twenty minutes in the ring with Dwayne, and I was set for life.

That's why the match with Dwayne was such a big moment in my life. It wasn't about who was better, who would really win. Come on, that's ridiculous. It was about the fact I wanted to buy my mom and dad a house. I wanted to put money away for my daughter's education. I wanted to be able to afford nice things in life for me and my family. I was the undisputed WWE champion, on the fast track to fame and fortune. I was on top of the world.

And I was already looking over my shoulder, because I knew that the clock was ticking and my days were numbered.

***

Things were a lot different the next time Dwayne and I hooked it up in a WWE ring.

I was so excited the day I heard that I had been booked against Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson in Miami for our second one-on-one match (and if we're including the triple-threat match with HHH in Australia, our third match overall). It ended up being one of the most important days in my pro wrestling career, because that match in Miami was a pivotal point in my decision to quit WWE.

Before that first SummerSlam, the company flew me down to Miami so Dwayne and I could work out the high points and the finish of our upcoming match. It was Dwayne's daughter's first birthday, and he invited me to stay in his home with him and his family.

Dwayne's dad was a journeyman wrestler named Rocky Johnson, so he knew how to play the pro wrestling game as good as anyone. Just like Curt Hennig, Dwayne was born into the business. These second-generation wrestlers, and even third-generation wrestlers like Randy Orton, understand the business a lot better than guys who break in from other walks of life, because they grew up around it. Dwayne, Curt, and Randy all saw what the business was about, and the sacrifices a family has to make. They also learned the psychology behind the scenes because they were exposed to it from Day One. That's a tremendous advantage for them, because it might as well be in their blood.

I wasn't born into the business, so unlike Dwayne and the others, I had to learn the hard way about a lot of things.

If someone from the company would have called me and said, "Hey, Brock, would you mind doing a job for

Photo by Gary Dineen/Winning Image

Lesnar's long association with Paul Heyman led to their collaboration on *Death Clutch*. If Lesnar ever does make a return to WWE, as has been rumored, it is a near certainty that Heyman will be at his side, as he was in this 2002 photo.

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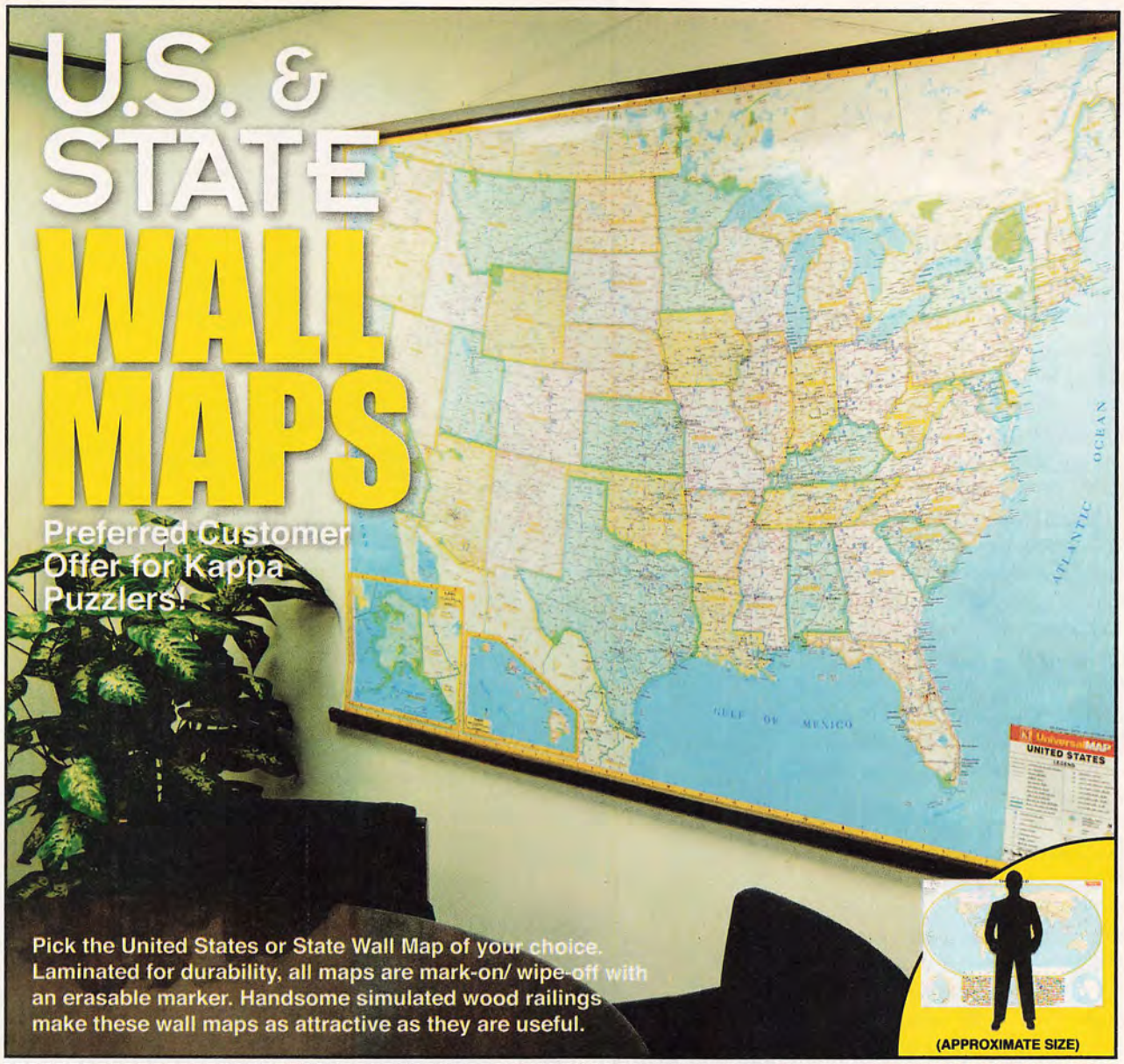

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DEATH CLUTCH

Lesnar's SummerSlam 2002 match against The Rock not only netted him the Undisputed WWE title, but put him in a position of financial security. Lesnar has only pleasant memories about the manner in which Dwayne Johnson conducted business.

The Rock this weekend in Miami?" it wouldn't have been a big deal to me. I owed him that much. I liked Dwayne, and I learned a lot from him that week before he put me over for the championship. But the way everything was handled in Miami really opened my eyes to the wrestling business, and the night of my big match with Dwayne is one that I will never forget.

I showed up at the arena and was met by Jack Lanza, the road agent in charge of the show. Jack was a Minnesota boy and took me under his wing when I moved up to the WWE main roster. As the road agent, Jack would get the finishes on the phone or via e-mail from Vince, or J.R., or [John] Laurinaitis. He would then produce the live event and report back to the bosses on how the show went, who performed well and who didn't.

I had been up and down the road with Jack a few times, so this day shouldn't have been any different from any other. I figured when the time was right, we would all sit down and Jack would tell us how Vince wanted the match to end. No reason to believe this show was any different from all the others, except I was working with Dwayne, and that was pretty special for the both of us.

Then I realized: *Something ain't right here.*

The show had already started, and Jack hadn't given us a finish yet. Dwayne and I started talking about our match, and I kept thinking, *Okay, but what's the finish here?*

It was about an hour-and-a-half before we were supposed to step into the ring for the main event of the evening, and Dwayne says to me, "... and that's when I'll hit you with the Rock Bottom, one ... two ... three!"

I actually laughed because I thought Dwayne was ribbing me. I was the WWE champion. The Golden Boy. It was my time to be on top. I was supposed to win. And here's The Rock, who should know better, saying he's going to pin the WWE champion with the Rock Bottom. That was funny.

Dwayne had this nervous look on his face, and he wasn't laughing with me. He just put all the heat on Vince right away, and said, "I can't believe Vince didn't tell you ... didn't he call you about this?"

Dwayne made it seem like he thought I knew he was supposed to beat me, and that he was shocked I didn't.

"I told you about things like this," Dwayne said. "A lot of s__ falls through the cracks, you gotta stay on top of Vince about everything."

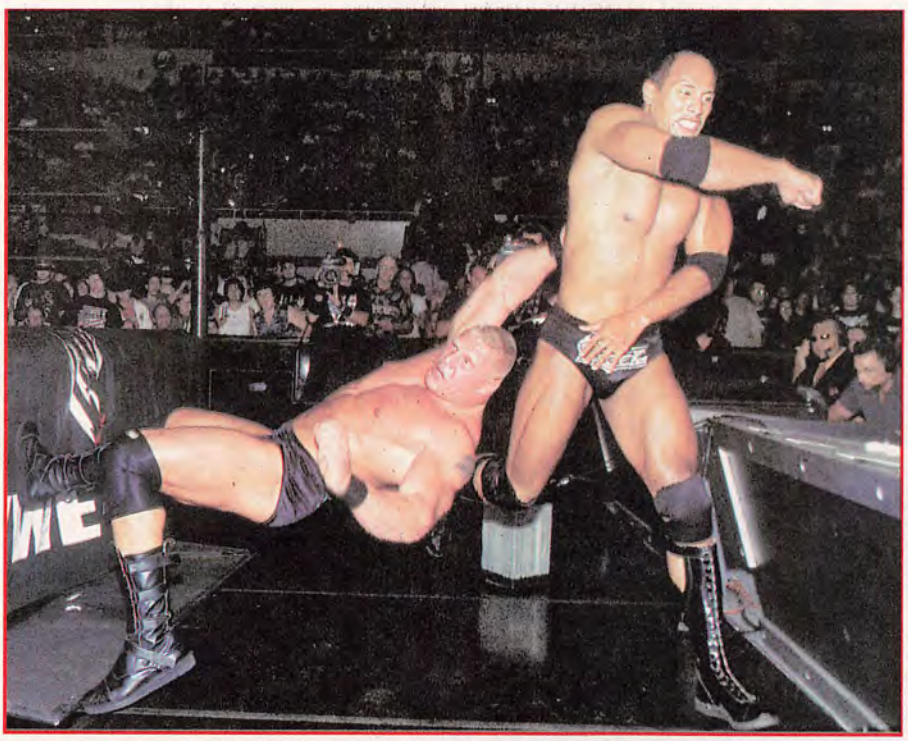
I remember the week I stayed with Dwayne, he was on the phone with

Vince constantly. It was the right way to handle his business. Dwayne had a hand in everything they did with his character. He was a big enough star that he had some say in how his character was used and how Vince would market and promote him. Even back then, Dwayne would tell me, "Now that you're going to be on top, you need to stay on top of everything, all the time."

So I went to Lanza and said, "Jack, tell me what the hell is going on here ... I'm the WWE champion, and I'm losing tonight? Why didn't anyone tell me?" Jack's only reply was, "Well, it's a non-title match!"

What the hell did that mean? I never knew that my title wasn't on the line that night. I never knew that I was supposed to lose to The Rock.

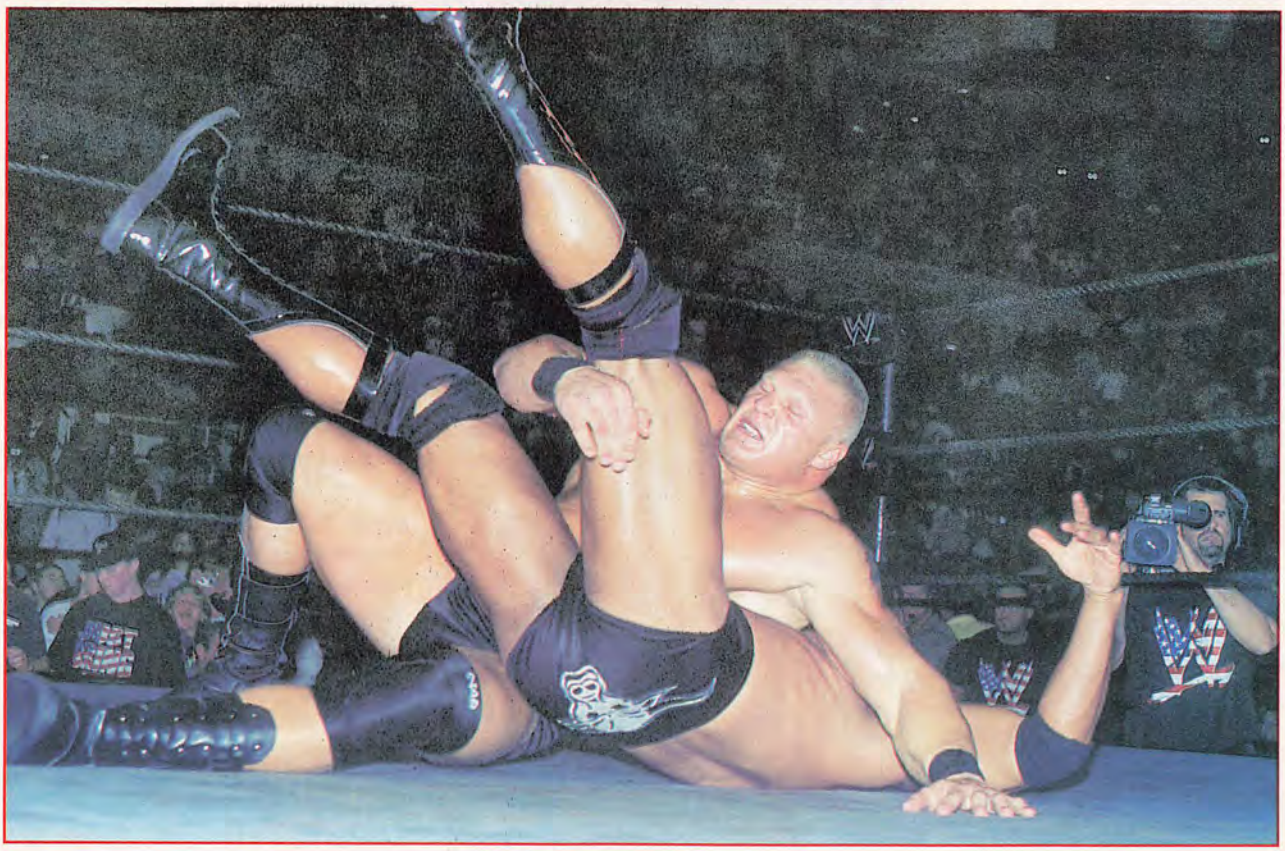
"It's Miami," Jack said. "No one will ever know!"



I can remember hearing Jack say that like it was yesterday. I wasn't upset about losing. That wasn't the point at all. What bothered me was that I was the last guy to know, when I should have been the first. No one had the guts to tell me the truth, until it was time to step into the ring. Just from the look on Dwayne's face and the tone in Jack's voice, I knew they were in on something I wasn't. It was obvious to me that Vince, Dwayne, and Jack were all in cahoots, and I wasn't being smartened up to the situation until the very last minute.

That night changed my attitude toward the WWE, because it's when I started to feel Vince was a manipulating bastard, and that I was being played.

I thought it was a stupid deci-



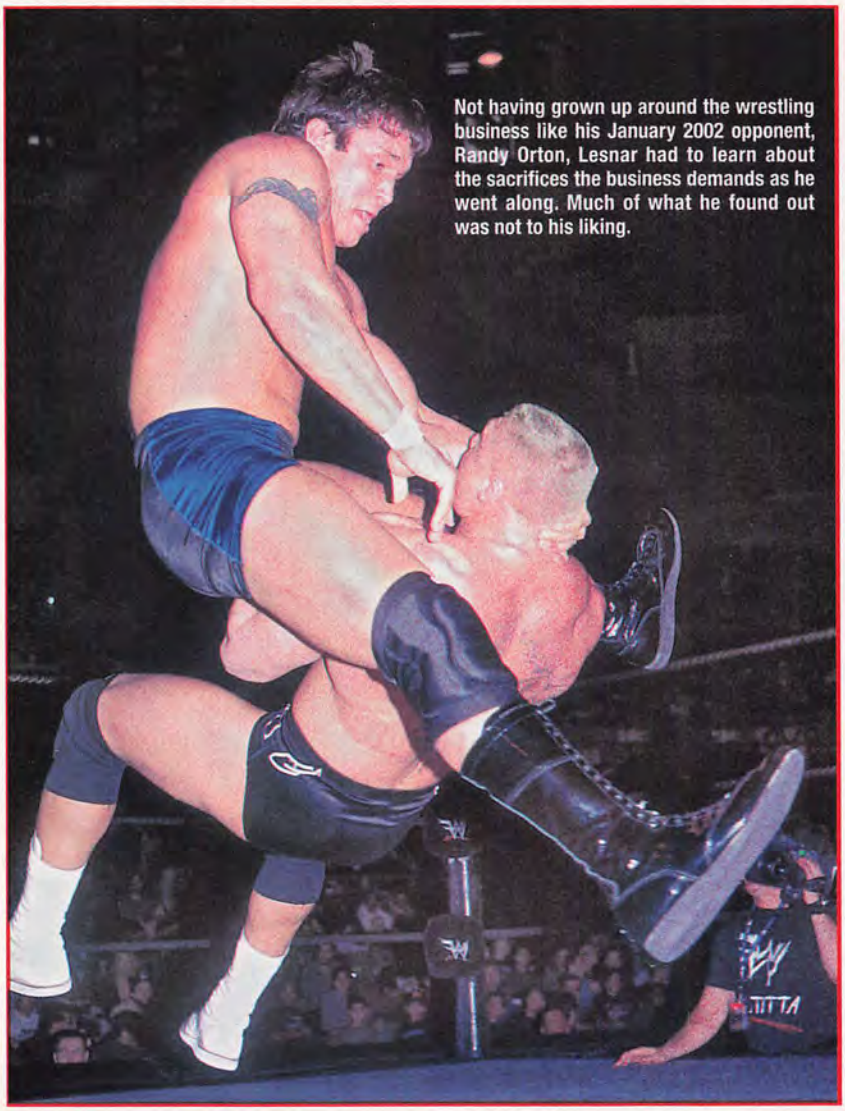
DEATH CLUTCH

By mid-2003, Vince McMahon and Sable's affair was no longer a secret (left). An appearance at *Smackdown* led to a confrontation between Vince and his daughter, Smackdown GM Stephanie, that would ultimately involve The Undertaker (acting in Stephanie's behalf) and Lesnar (right, who tried to protect Vince). The irony is that three years later, Sable (Rena Mero) would become Mrs. Brock Lesnar.

sion to have the WWE champion lose in a "non-title match," but that was something I was going to have to accept. As someone who fights for real, it made no sense to me for the champion to lose … and still be the champion. If someone can beat the champ, then they deserve the title. It's that simple.

Who wants to see that? People pay to see the champion because he's the champion, and his position as number one is on the line. I didn't like it. I had been pulling the company plow, been filling the arenas and selling the pay-per-views, and no one even tells me that Dwayne wants to get his loss back? No one has the balls to just say, "Brock, this is the way it is"?

Vince can't tell me the angle, the story, and why it makes sense for me to lay down for The Rock in a "non-title" match? He doesn't want my two cents' worth? I'm the damn poster boy for this company, and I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on?



Not having grown up around the wrestling business like his January 2002 opponent, Randy Orton, Lesnar had to learn about the sacrifices the business demands as he went along. Much of what he found out was not to his liking.

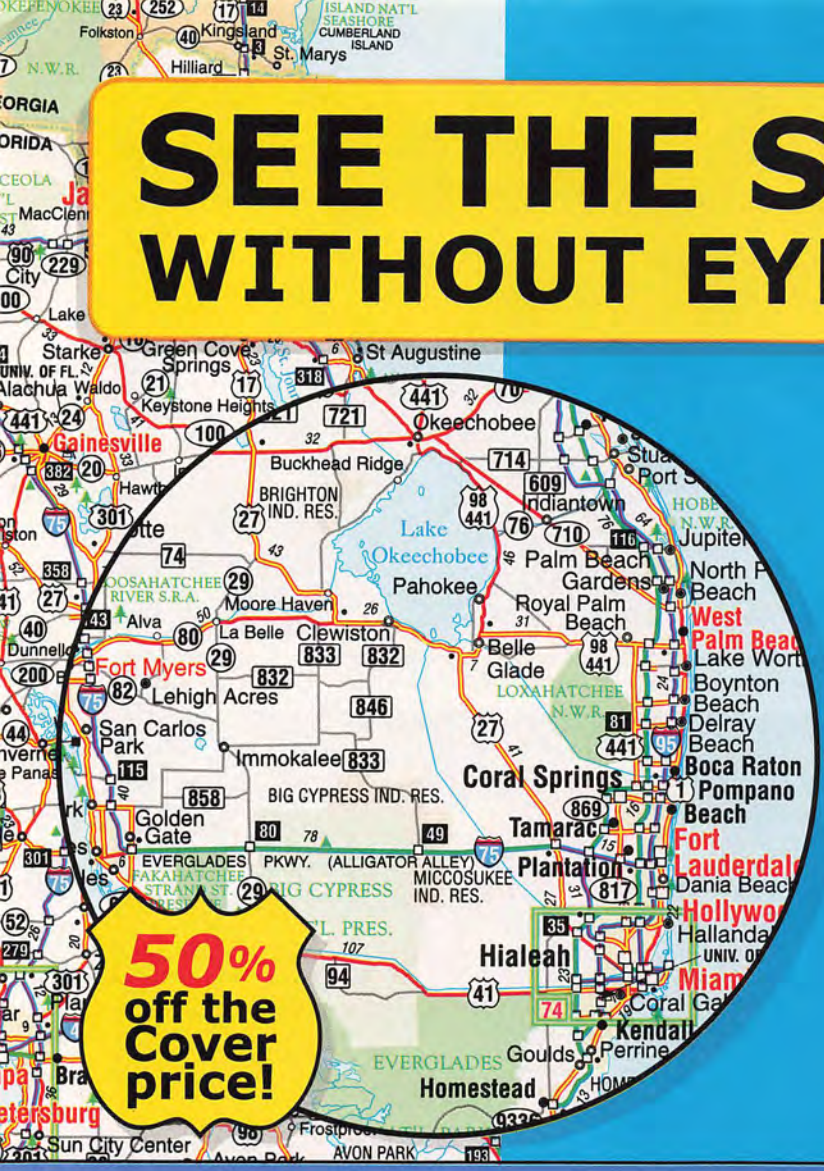
Even though I knew one day I would have to do a job for The Rock, I still kept thinking that Vince was really screwing with me, and that there was a lot more behind keeping me in the dark than just Dwayne wanting to get his loss back after a year-and-a-half. Did I do something to piss Vince off? Did he need to show that he could keep me in my place? Something was going on.

I'll be the first one to admit that I'm a control freak. When it comes to business, I want to know what's going on, when, where, and why. This is my living. If I have to lose for the good of the company, I will, but it'll be on my terms. I thought I had a good relationship with Vince, but obviously I was wrong.

When it came to my business with the WWE, the one person I thought I could trust was Vince. When I first started, we had that handshake, and I put my future in his hands. He ran the company. He controlled everything. I knew that if I couldn't count on him to tell it to me straight, I was screwed. I could play the game with everybody else on the roster and in the office, but I couldn't play games with the owner of the company. That's a fight I'm going to lose every time because *he* writes the checks. *He* makes all the rules.

If I'm Vince's top guy … the guy he's

SEE THE SIGHTS WITHOUT EYESTRAIN



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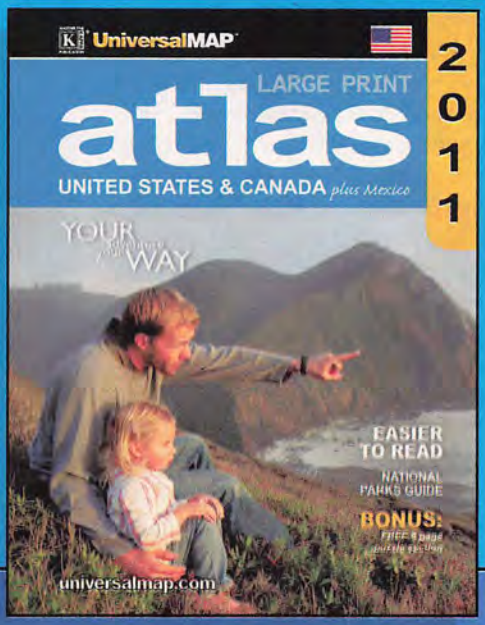

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relying on … his go-to guy … his main event … why would he lie to me? Why would he play this kind of game with me, in Miami, for no reason? Just to mess with my head? Just to do it for the sake of doing it?

To Vince, it may have been just another day in the wrestling business, but to me it was a lot more than that. That day was the first in a chain of events that led to my departure from the WWE.

The wheels were still spinning in my head about getting screwed over in Miami when Vince tells me he wants me to lose the WWE title to Eddie Guerrero. Of course, Vince put his own twist on it: "Goldberg's going to interfere, give the win to Eddie, and that'll set up this huge match at WrestleMania between the two of you. Lesnar vs. Goldberg is so big, it will sell itself; you don't need the WWE title involved."

Of course, Vince kept telling me how good it would be for my character to drop the title to Eddie, and then take on Goldberg. "You can beat Goldberg in 30 seconds. He's leaving, so I don't care. We can get Austin involved, and it's going to be the biggest match on the card. WrestleMania 20. Madison Square Garden. Brock Lesnar vs. Bill Goldberg, and 'Stone-Cold' Steve Austin will be out there as the special guest referee. It's big box office, it's pure money."

I knew what this was about. Vince was selling me hard on WrestleMania because he wanted to get the title on Eddie Guerrero. Vince kept telling me how the Latino audience was growing, and this was the right move for business. But after what happened in Miami, our relationship had already gone south. I never believed another word that came out of Vince's mouth. I no longer had any faith whatsoever in the Federation.

But Vince isn't the only one that screwed me. □

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The Rock tried to preach to Lesnar the importance of protecting your turf by staying in constant communication with the company's owner. That was another lesson Brock had to learn the hard way.

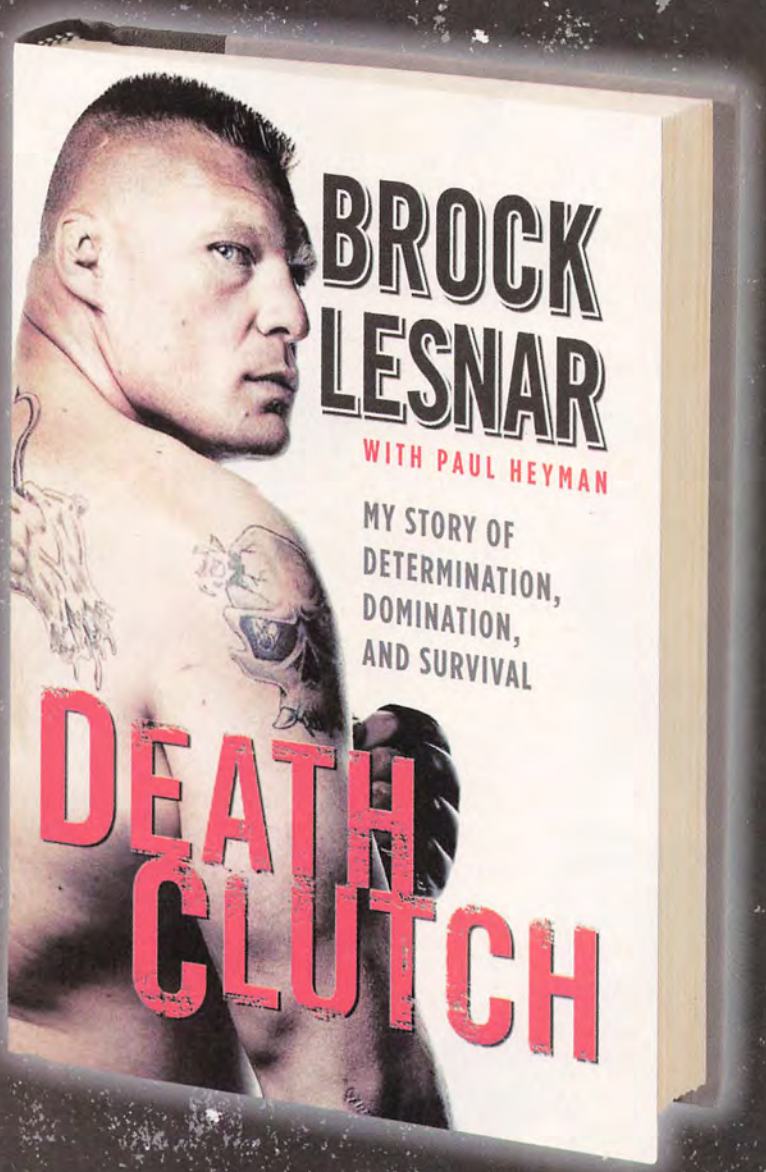
McMahon was convinced that Goldberg vs. Lesnar at WrestleMania 20 would be a huge draw. The New York fans knew it was both wrestlers' final WWE match and were very critical of their performances.

As special referee, Steve Austin kept a close eye on the action. When it was all over, "Stone-Cold" hit both men with stunners, much to the delight of the fans.

I don't talk about my personal life with strangers.

This one time, and this one time only, you are invited to join me in my private world for a few hours.

Just don't ever expect another invitation.



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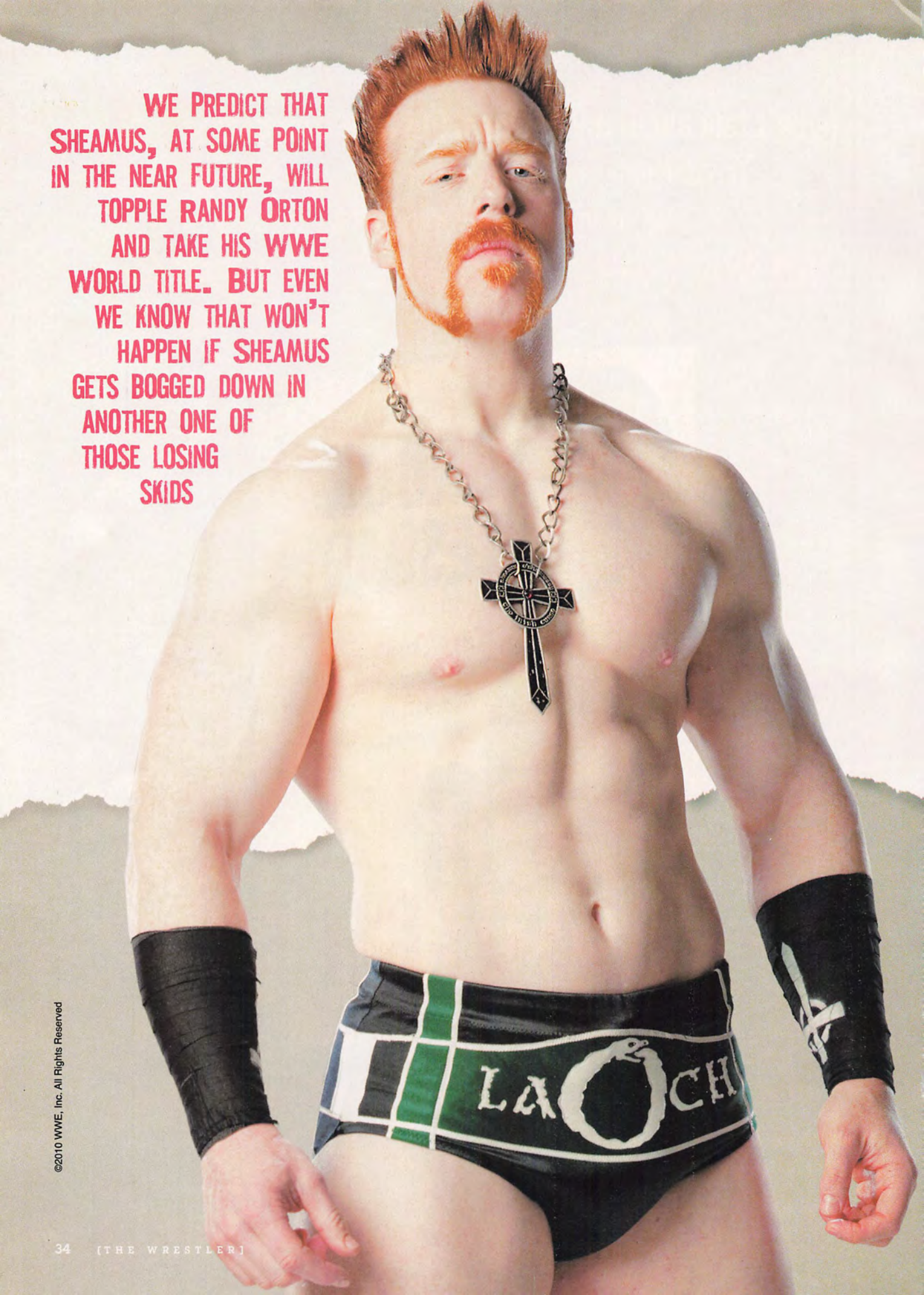

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YOU WILL BEAT ORTON!

NOW DON'T SHAME US WITH ANOTHER SLUMP

BY MIKE BESSLER

MOST PEOPLE AGREE there are few guarantees in life. Then again, there is something to be said for the proverbial "smart money." And when it comes right down to it, it's undeniable that Irish powerhouse Sheamus is on a collision course with Randy Orton—and that once the dust settles, the "Celtic Warrior" could very well emerge with his third world title in WWE.

Just as certain, however, is the idea that Sheamus' opportunity to challenge Orton for his title will never come if Sheamus slides back into one of those deep slumps that have thus far marred his career.

Now competing on Smackdown after spending nearly two years in ECW and Raw, the story of Sheamus' WWE career thus far has been a pronounced tale of boon and bane.

He wrested the coveted WWE championship from John Cena in late-2009 and later won the 2010 King of the Ring tournament, besting Kofi Kingston and John Morrison in the process.

Photo by George Napolitano

While Sheamus hasn't fared all that well against Randy Orton, his new momentum on Smackdown have many (including this magazine) believing Sheamus can indeed take Orton's WWE World title … as long as he doesn't lapse into another major slump.

Photo by George Napolitano

Triple-H and Sheamus are blood rivals, for sure. However, HHH has seen some things in Sheamus that remind him of himself. Maybe that's why Triple-H has shared his ideas on how Sheamus can avoid another skid.

But it was all downhill after that, as Sheamus subsequently dropped quick, one-sided losses to Morrison, Evan Bourne, Daniel Bryan, Mark Henry, and Triple-H.

For weeks, Sheamus looked as inept as any wrestler ever has inside a ring. Much like the WWE fans and wrestlers watching him, he was thoroughly stumped by his inability to simply compete against, much less dominate, men he'd defeated before.

Desperate to end his slump, Sheamus put his career on the line against Daniel Bryan's U.S. championship. Perhaps the pressure of having his livelihood hanging in the balance would somehow force Sheamus to fight out of his skid.

When he captured the U.S. championship in April 2011, it appeared as though Sheamus' stock was again on the rise … but his reign proved surprisingly short as the crimson-crowned wrestler ultimately dropped the strap to Kofi Kingston only a few weeks later.

Owing much to his own fortitude and work ethic, Sheamus recently climbed back in the hunt for Randy Orton's World heavyweight championship, butting heads with number-one contender Christian in an attempt to regain his status as a main-event fixture.

Then came WWE's early-summer tour of Europe and a surprising string of defeats to Kane.

This is precisely the test Sheamus must pass if he entertains any plans of forcing a showdown with Orton for the World title.

Recent history has shown that Sheamus has difficulty putting such losses behind him. But that is exactly what he needs to do. Otherwise, he could be facing an implosion similar to the one he experienced while on the Raw roster.

Just as with pro baseball players who face hitting slumps, one small setback can shatter Sheamus' confidence and send him into another extended losing streak.

"Sheamus is suffering from a very common condition called All-or-Nothing thinking," says noted wrestling psychologist Dr. Sydney M. Basil. "Basically, Sheamus feels that when something doesn't go his way, the entire situation is a loss, and there is no other viable outcome. To Sheamus, if he doesn't win, it means he's a loser. Period. And he carries that mentality into the next match. The problem occurs when negative outcomes compound each other. Say Sheamus loses on a Sunday night pay-per-view, unsuccessfully seeks revenge the next night on *Raw*, and then tries again and fails on *Smackdown* the following night. Each time Sheamus fails, it's because—in his mind—he's a terrible wrestler. Three successive nights like that and you can see how an All-or-Nothing Thinker would fall into an abyss. But none of it really has anything to do with his wrestling ability.

"The strange thing is," Basil continued, "these slumps tend to perpetuate themselves: The wrestler fails, doubts his ability, enters his next match with a lack of confidence, loses again, enters his next match and starts tinkering with his game, getting even farther away from the things that made him great in the first place. For men like Sheamus, it's simply better to avoid a slump altogether."

One unlikely source of advice, Triple-H, says he knows how Sheamus can easily avoid another slump.

"When Sheamus loses a match," said Triple-H, "the first thing he should do afterward is watch a replay of it. That way, he sees not only which flaws need to be corrected, but he also sees the things he did well, and can then find ways to build

on them. It could be something as small as the snap of a punch, but just anything he can use to boost his confidence."

Former WWE and TNA world champion Mick Foley has long practiced mental visualization techniques to maintain positivity, even in the face of great adversity in the ring. Perhaps by visualizing how his matches will play out ahead of time, Sheamus can physically and mentally prepare to counter the specific challenges that threaten to deny him victory and plunge him into another funk.

Of course, one would hardly expect a smash-mouth brute like Sheamus to embrace such an introspective, touchy-feely notion as visualization. A more tangible way Sheamus can safeguard against another tailspin might be by re-committing to the over-the-top brutality that characterized his early days in ECW and Raw. Jerry Lawler, who remembers some impressions of Sheamus' first few weeks in Raw, says the Irishman should consider going back to basics.

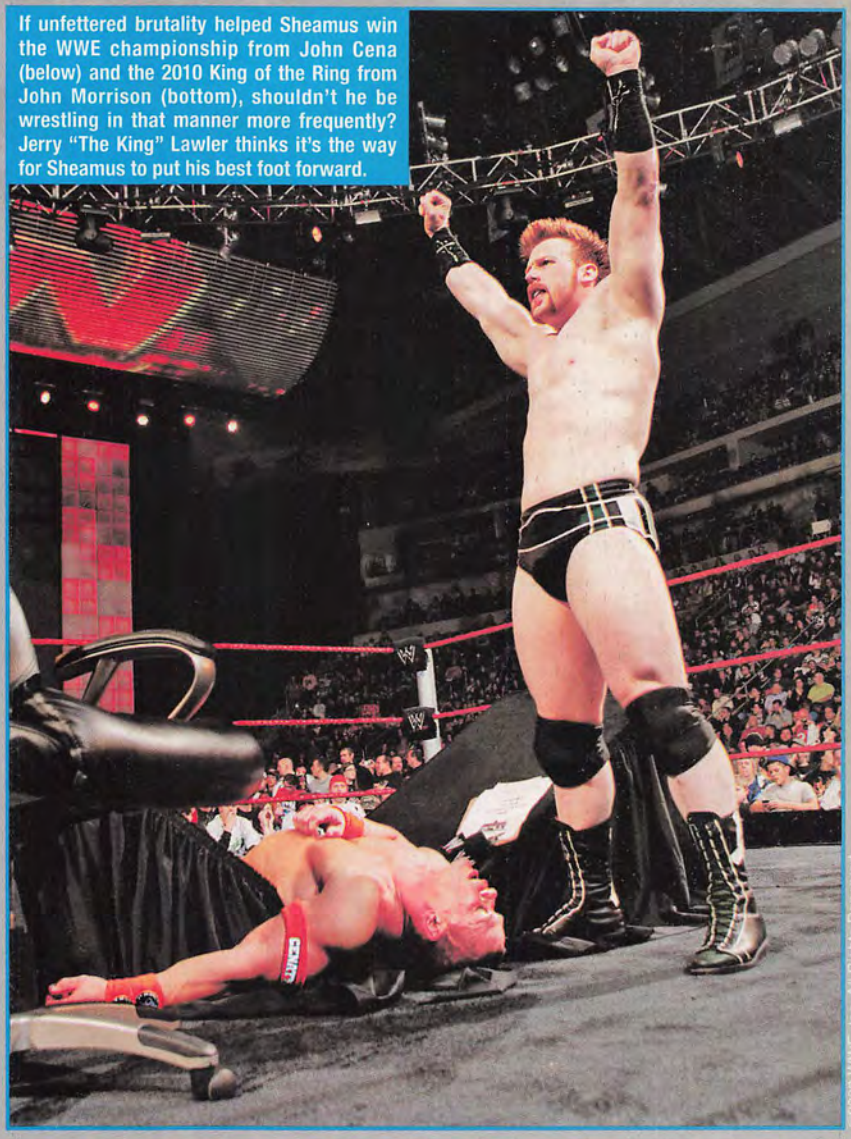
"I recall watching Sheamus just decimate Evan Bourne in a post-match attack that took place just a few feet from the announcers' table," Lawler said. "And I kept yelling to Evan, 'Don't stand in front of him!' But Evan couldn't get away. A week later, Sheamus attacked me, and I saw just how hard it was to get out of his way.

"The point is, Sheamus was so fired up and so aggressive that even somebody as agile as Evan Bourne couldn't escape quickly enough. I haven't seen Sheamus behave that way in quite some time, but if he can rediscover that ferocity, I doubt there will be any more slumps in his future."

For Sheamus' sake, let's hope "The King" is correct. Sheamus can ill-afford another drought. With Christian, Wade Barrett, Ezekiel Jackson, and Mark Henry among those vying for a shot at Orton's championship, one loss could send the loser straight down the Smackdown rankings.

No doubt, the pressure's on, but that doesn't mean Sheamus should treat every match as if it is his last. He must accept the fact that an occasional loss—even an upset loss—is a common occurrence in today's game. Not all, in fact, *no* matches are a referendum on any wrestler's overall worth to the sport.

At this moment, we just might have more confidence in Sheamus than he does in himself. □



If unfettered brutality helped Sheamus win the WWE championship from John Cena (below) and the 2010 King of the Ring from John Morrison (bottom), shouldn't he be wrestling in that manner more frequently? Jerry "The King" Lawler thinks it's the way for Sheamus to put his best foot forward.

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CAN'T BAG HIM IF YOU CAN'T CATCH HIM

Sin Cara is far from the perfect wrestler, but he has managed to stay one step ahead of Cody Rhodes and his infamous paper bag. As Rhodes and WWE fans are finding out with each match, there may be no limit to the luchadore's ability to amaze

SIN CARA CONTINUES TO DAZZLE

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

FEW STORIES IN the world of professional wrestling thus far in 2011 have created as much buzz as WWE's signing of the luchadore formerly known as Mistico. One of the premier athletes in Mexico's legendary CMLL promotion, Mistico was a huge get for WWE. Under his new ring name of Sin Cara (literally meaning "without a face"), this high-flyer has earned the fans' affection in seemingly no time.

For longtime international wrestling fans, this is, of course, no surprise. For several years, Sin

Photo by George Napolitano

Sin Cara looks confused as Cody Rhodes hands him the paper bag he intends to put over Cara's head at the conclusion of the match. However, it was Rhodes who left the ring in confusion after Cara emerged with the victory.

Photo by George Napolitano

Cara had been tearing it up in Mexico and Japan, and many insiders felt it was only a matter of time before he would make his way to the sport's leading organization, where his talents could be showcased for a global audience. And now he is making the most of that opportunity as part of the Smackdown brand.

Although WWE has certainly hosted its share of aerialists in the past, none have quite brought the pure lucha style to American rings the way Sin Cara has—not even Rey Mysterio Jr., who, out of necessity, has incorporated much more of the American style into his repertoire.

Time after time, Cara has confounded opponents like Jack Swagger, Sheamus, and Evan Bourne with his unique and innovative techniques. And while this style may at times seem more than a bit unorthodox, it still remains spectacular to behold.

More importantly, the lucha style has served Cara well in his early WWE career. He remained undefeated in WWE for the first three months of his tenure, eventually dropping an early-July match to former World heavyweight champion Christian.

Remarkably, Cara has lost virtually no momentum since the loss.

There are a few reasons for this. For one, win or lose, fans are still drawn to Cara's impressive gravity-defying feats in the ring. Simply put, he can dazzle fans into forgetting his losses.

Another reason: Fans love to see egotistical villains, like Cody Rhodes, befuddled and embarrassed by Cara.

Larger opponents like Rhodes—who is by no means a behemoth, but much larger than Cara—have been stepping into the ring expecting to ground their much smaller opponent, only to be shown up by the mercurial luchadore.

Indeed, Rhodes anticipated capping off a recent bout against Cara with his humiliating post-match ritual of placing a brown paper bag over the head of his fallen foe in order to spare the crowd from his ugliness. But, if Rhodes had any reason to use a brown paper bag following their bout, it would have been to hide his own face in shame after falling to the quicker Cara. Simply put, Rhodes couldn't catch Sin Cara, much less put a bag over his head.

Rhodes apparently fell into the same trap many WWE wrestlers have: They underestimate the effectiveness of Sin Cara's repertoire, which contains maneuvers—such as his moonsault sideslam, and combination tilt-a-whirl headscissors/DDT—that many WWE competitors have likely never even seen before, let alone scouted.

Just as in so many forms of martial arts, Cara's moveset incorporates the use of momentum and balance that often leave his opponents looking up at the lights.

If plodding hulks like Sheamus and Swagger, or even relatively lean wres-

Photo by George Napolitano

Like most of Cara's opponents, Rhodes was no doubt unprepared for some of the unorthodox maneuvers Sin Cara threw at him. Cody might have been expecting to ground the luchadore, but Cara proved a hard target to catch, let alone hit.

tlers like Rhodes and Evan Bourne, overcommit their weight for just an instant, Cara is quick enough to strike with his own maneuver and assume a distance that makes a countermove impossible.

Nevertheless, there are some in the Smackdown lockerroom who believe it may only be a matter of time before the novelty wears off and Cara finds himself struggling to keep his head above water in the WWE pool.

"I'll admit, the guy's got some moves," Sheamus said recently when asked to assess the luchadore's talent. "But that'll only take him so far. Yeah, maybe he got the better of me, but he's new here. We're all still getting used to him. And once we do, all that fancy flying around isn't going to help him anymore. WWE has always been a big man's domain, and the law of averages is going to catch up to Sin Cara. We'll have him packing for Mexico in no time."

Sheamus' words are much more than just sour grapes from an embarrassed victim. For as impressive as Cara has looked at times, there have been a few bumps in the road as he adapts to the WWE style of wrestling. For example, there has been a time or two where scaling the ropes to execute a flashy high-risk maneuver has given a dazed opponent just enough time to clear the cobwebs and avoid (or at least forestall) a loss.

There is also the question of what will happen once his WWE compatriots have him fully scouted. Will the same maneuvers that surprised and confounded his opponents be as effective the second, third, or fourth time around? Perhaps the biggest question regarding Cara's ability to thrive in WWE is whether he'll be willing and able to institute a Plan B that calls for a different in-ring style.

A former trainer of Cara's, Fray Tormenta, says his fans have nothing to fear. "Sin Cara is well-schooled in multiple wrestling styles," he said. "I am sure WWE wouldn't have come calling if Sin Cara could wrestle only one style. Not only has he been successful against a variety of opponents over the years, but he's looked spectacular against them. I think that as time goes on, and Sin Cara gets more comfortable in WWE, he'll only get better."

Better?

Can WWE fans—and wrestlers—handle it? □

It took more than three months, but Christian finally snapped Cara's undefeated streak. So far, the loss hasn't seemed to cost Sin Cara any momentum, or any fans.

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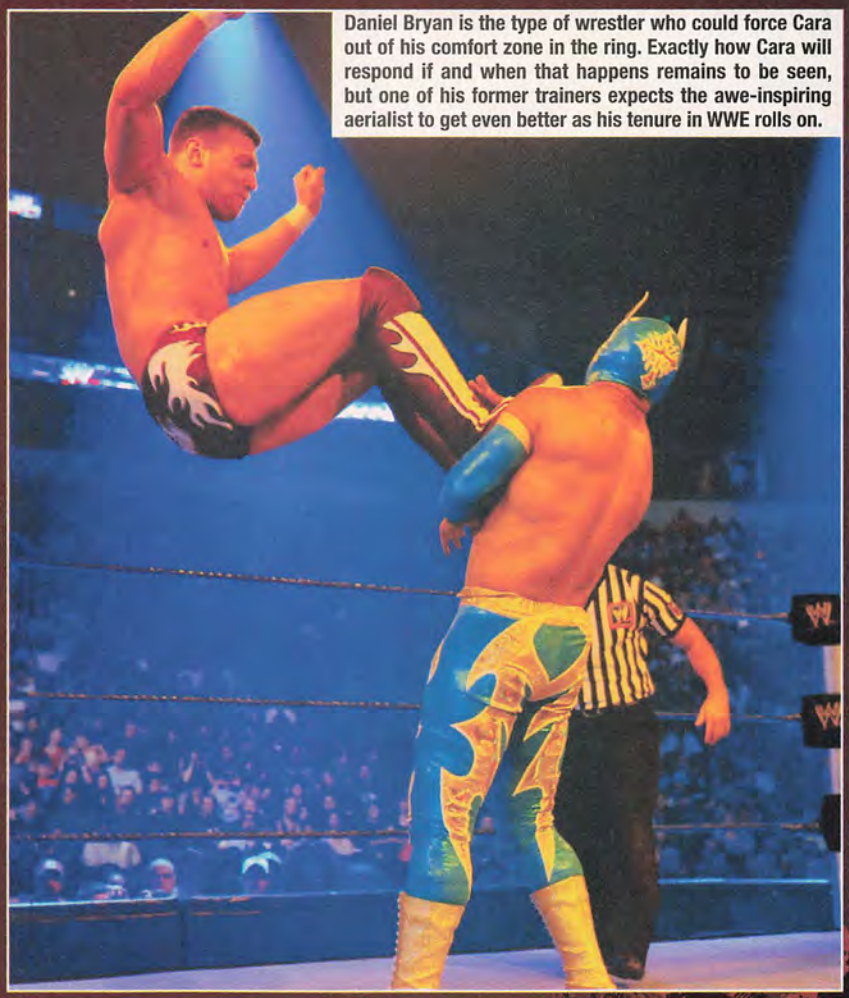

Daniel Bryan is the type of wrestler who could force Cara out of his comfort zone in the ring. Exactly how Cara will respond if and when that happens remains to be seen, but one of his former trainers expects the awe-inspiring aerialist to get even better as his tenure in WWE rolls on.

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Photo by Scott Finkelstein

FEUD FOR THOUGHT

HATRED NEEDN'T BE THE DRIVING FORCE IN THE RICHARDS-EDWARDS RIVALRY

At some point, it seems inevitable that with the stakes as high as they are that the friendship between Davey Richards and Eddie Edwards will disintegrate. For now, though, can't we just enjoy the rivalry for its intense level of athleticism and sportsmanship?

Davey Richards shed no blood in winning the Ring of Honor heavyweight title, but he did shed a few tears (opposite page). Eddie Edwards, his best friend, tag team partner, and now the former ROH champ, offers his heartfelt congratulations (below).

BY AL CASTLE
PHOTOS BY GEORGE TAHINOS

IMAGINE IF AFTER Hulk Hogan pinned Randy Savage for WWF heavyweight title at WrestleMania 5, the two former partners embraced in center ring. That would have been, to say the least, unexpected. Taking it a step further, imagine if the two rivals reunited as The Mega Powers for a tag team bout less than two weeks later? That would have been downright surreal.

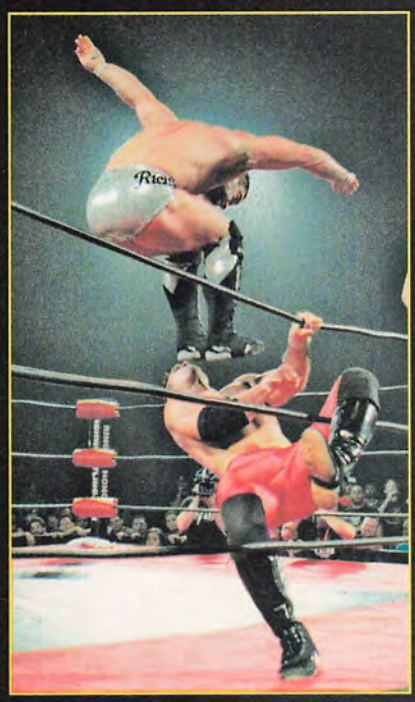
And yet, precisely just a scenario played out over the summer in Ring of Honor, where tag team partners-turned-rivals Eddie Edwards and Davey Richards clashed on June 26 for the heavyweight title in what was arguably the biggest match in the promotion's history. When it was all said and done, Richards won the title, and in doing so delivered on his promise to "crush" Edwards'

Richards threw everything in his considerable arsenal at Edwards, but Eddie refused to stay down. It was a memorable 31 minutes for both wrestlers and for the fans who packed the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City to witness it.

dream. And yet, Edwards responded to the devastating loss not with venom or resentment, but with words of praise for his mentor. What's more, the two men reunited as The American Wolves to beat Roderick Strong and Michael Elgin in Richmond, Virginia, just 12 days later.

As unusual as the fallout to one of ROH's most intense rivalries may have appeared, those close to the situation say they would have expected no different from Richards and Edwards—two fierce competitors whose respect for each other is matched only by their respect for their sport.

"It's a testament to the kind of wrestlers that Eddie and Davey are, and to the kind of wrestling we have



After the hard-hitting affair, the vanquished Edwards straps the belt around the waist of the new champion. Davey wasn't the only one seen crying; there were many moist eyes among the fans—and even a few along press row.

here at Ring of Honor," ROH Executive Producer Jim Cornette said. "Those two boys don't look at what they do as 'sports entertainment.' They look at it as sport. And in sports, you don't need to hate your opponent in order to bring the fight to him."

The epic New York City showdown between Richards and Edwards marked the climax of a story that began in 2008, when both men joined the heel faction of Sweet 'n' Sour Inc. The two stablemates began teaming together, and, before long, "the hunt was on," to quote the duo's catchphrase.

Richards and Edwards dubbed themselves "The American Wolves," and in April of 2009, they defeated Kevin Steen and El Generico to win the ROH tag team championship. With their no-nonsense approach and explosive wrestling style, the Wolves quickly became one of ROH's top acts, headlining shows in memorable matches against The Briscoe Brothers and the team of Bryan Danielson and Tyler Black.

Even while enjoying their tag team success, it was apparent that Richards stood out as the most likely breakout star of the duo, even after Edwards beat him in the tournament finals to crown the first-ever ROH TV champion in March 2010.

But Richards' future, and that of the Wolves, appeared in jeopardy when Davey revealed in a 2010 interview with THE WRESTLER that he intended to retire from the sport at the end of the year to start a family and pursue a new career in emergency medicine. Edwards supported his partner in his decision.

It took the collapse of his marriage, and the deaths of his grandparents, for Richards to reconsider his choice, and rediscover his passion for pro wrestling.

At Final Battle 2010, Richards had the opportunity to achieve his ultimate goal of winning the ROH heavyweight championship. But, after suffering a concussion during the bout, Richards lost to then-champion Roderick Strong. After the crushing defeat, Richards made a vow. His next shot at the ROH title would be his last.

Meanwhile, Edwards suffered a big defeat of his own, when his 10-month reign as TV champion came to an end at the hands of Christopher Daniels. Fortunately for Edwards, he had earned a shot at a more prestigious title by winning the 2010 Survival of the Fittest competition. And, at Manhattan Mayhem on March 19, Edwards shocked the ROH universe by doing what his partner could not—beating Roderick Strong for the heavyweight championship.

Not surprisingly, Richards was the first to come to the ring and congratulate his former partner. But it wasn't long before ROH management began pushing for an Edwards-Richards dream match. Richards initially refused, saying he did not want to be the person to end his partner's title reign. Tension grew between the duo when Edwards showed signs of resentment toward Richards, whom he believed was patronizing him and not showing him the respect he deserved. Edwards pleaded with Richards to wrestle him for the title to prove once and for all who was the best. And Edwards made a vow of his own: If Richards refused his challenge, he would quit the company. Richards accepted.

When the match finally took place, it lived up to its lofty expectations, with the longtime partners countering each others' holds, and gradually wearing each other down with varied submissions and high-impact maneuvers. In the end, it was a series of kicks and a running knee to the head that finally set up Edwards for the winning pin.

In an emotional celebration in the ring, Richards spoke about how he considered ROH his true family. And no closer a brother could he have than the man he had just defeated.

"Not only was I physically exhausted after that match, but I was emotionally exhausted. Winning the ROH title capped off one of the toughest years of my life," Richards said in a telephone interview. "And the only thing sweeter than winning that belt was having my best friend hand it to me and be genuinely happy for me."

But not everyone was so quick to accept that the story of The American Wolves could have a happy ending.

"I don't doubt that those two really do care about each other, but they care about the ROH title more. And, sooner or later, it's going to cost them their friendship," said Strong, the former champ. "You wait and see. Eddie can only stand by smiling so long while Davey gets all the accolades. Sooner or later, they'll quit playing nice."

For his part, Edwards concedes that he still has his eyes on the ROH title. But, he insists, having Richards as a partner and an opponent need not be mutually exclusive.

"Of course I'm disappointed about losing the title. But I'm also happy that Davey won it," Edwards said. "The bottom line is that Eddie fought me straight up, with honor, and pinned my shoulders to the mat. I'm proud of him. And, maybe, someday I'll make him proud by returning the favor." □

TOO LATE TO LEAVE A MARK?

WHERE WAS HENRY'S FURY 15 YEARS AGO?

Mark Henry is on a seek-and-destroy mission, inspired, oddly enough, by one of the very men he's taken out recently. Can Henry still accomplish what he set out to do 15 years ago?

BY GERRY STRAUSS

THE YEAR WAS 1996 and the WWF was in a state of flux. The rise of "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin, the emergence of The Rock, and the beginnings of the highly successful Attitude Era were still months away, and Vince McMahon was looking for new stars to support the likes of Shawn Michaels and The Undertaker.

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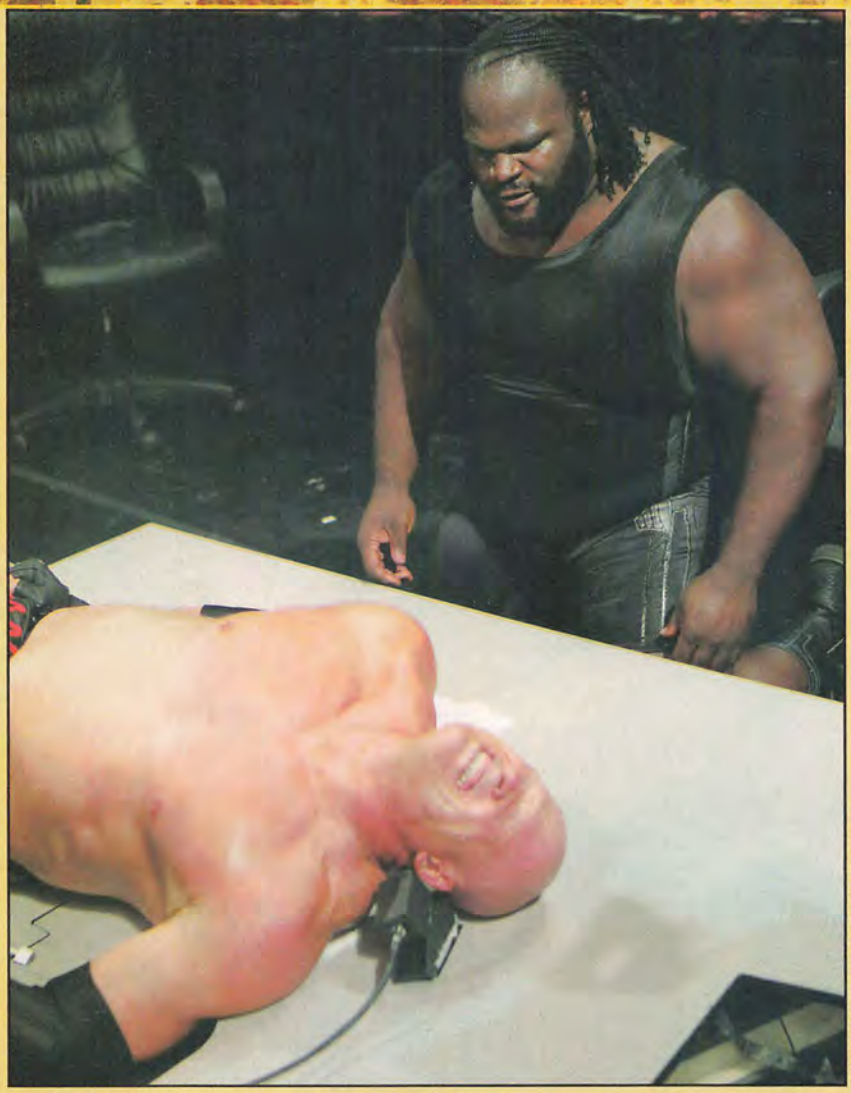

Mark Henry looks down at the pain he's caused Kane. In an ironic twist, it was Kane to some degree who inspired Henry to unleash his inner fury.

Who better to generate interest among fans than "The World's Strongest Man" as WWE purported its new acquisition, Mark Henry, to be?

After dominating powerlifting competitions from high school to the Olympics, 25-year-old Mark Henry's reputation as a weight room warrior preceded him to the degree that the WWF opted to not only hire him, but also to sign him to an unprecedented 10-year contract.

Henry had the unadulterated power, the unmatchable size, and scary aura so favored by Vince McMahon. It seemed that Henry was a true lock to dominate inside the WWF squared circle for years to come.

But it didn't happen.

Snake-bitten by inexperience, injuries, and the growing pains that come along with being a full-time WWE wrestler, the most potentially unstoppable force in pro wrestling was recruited to be a part of the Nation of Domination, a racially charged faction that counted The Rock, D-Lo Brown, and Ron Simmons (as Farooq) among its members. After a lengthy stint as the militant outfit's enforcer, it was clear The Rock was the undeniable star of the group. The WWF apparently felt that Henry would be better cast not as a dominant Olympic strong man, but rather as an introspective, poetry-spouting, soul-crooning love junkie.

Thus "Sexual Chocolate" was born … and suddenly Henry went from powerlifter to powder puff in the blink of an eye. A nauseating romance with the geriatric Mae Young quickly followed, all while his in-ring losses piled up.

Since that stage of his career, Henry has been able to cultivate more of a mean streak—but only for brief periods of time. Just when it seems the big man is ready to hunker down and unleash his physical tools in serious pursuit of a world title, he seems to show up in tag matches with WWE fan favorites such as Rey Mysterio Jr. and Evan Bourne, and fans are left to wonder why a wrestler so capable of mass destruction would settle for serving as a gentle giant partner to cruiserweights.

"Mark was ECW champion, don't forget," said NOD stablemate Simmons, a former NWA World champion. "But I see your point. It's been stop-and-start with Mark his whole career and I don't really know why. But I do know that for somebody from whom so much was expected, the fact that he hasn't won a major world title yet has to be driving him nuts."

Simmons' observation goes a long way in explaining Henry's recent behavior. Wrestlers with Mark Henry's experience and tenure don't just wake up one

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day and decide to terrorize a wrestling promotion, as Henry has done of late. Most often, circumstances develop that cause deep feelings of anger and resentment to fester until a particular incident or series of incidents sends that wrestler over the edge.

For example, recall Larry Zbyszko's brutal rebellion against Bruno Sammartino in the late-1970s. Sammartino had mentored Zbyszko for years. When Bruno held the ropes open for his protégé to enter the ring during their first match, Zbyszko could no longer stand what he regarded as Sammartino's patronization, and exploded in a vicious rage against his mentor.

Photo by Wayne McCarty

Zack Ryder lands a hard slap to Henry's face (right). The Mark Henry of just a year ago would have kept his composure, but the new Mark Henry tolerates no disrespect, whether it's from Ryder or a group of wrestlers, such as the ones who tried to oust him from the 2011 Royal Rumble (below).

Photo by George Napolitano

KANE: MARK HENRY CAN NEVER BE ME!

Though thinking so may seem odd after the brutal attack Kane suffered at the hands of Mark Henry on *Raw*, some wrestlers might actually be flattered that a wrestler of Henry's tenure sought to emulate their path to the top. Kane, however, is not one of those wrestlers.

The occasionally erudite Kane was abundantly clear that imitation is not necessarily the sincerest form of flattery when we suggested as much to him.

"Flattered?" he responded. "First of all, there is nothing flattering about being kicked and punched by somebody who can bench press a school bus, especially when it's a sneak-attack.

"Second, Mark Henry can never be me!" Kane added. "The evil in me runs in my blood. It was bred into me. Mark Henry doesn't have that in him. He's not evil. He's just a strong guy with a bad temper. Trust me, after this little tantrum, he'll go back to his dancing bear routine. It takes more than size to be a champion. You have to get into the hearts and minds of your opponents and steal their will. Mark Henry can't do that. Never has, never will. But I've built a career on it."

Certainly, Mark Henry will need more than a thirst for destruction if he hopes to channel his rage into a meaningful accomplishment between the ropes. Not only did Kane hold the WWE World title for five months, he finished number four in the "*PWI* 500" *(October 2011, on sale now)*. But whether Kane likes it or not, he cannot deny that Henry's rage has made him perhaps the most dangerous wrestler on Smackdown, if not the entire WWE roster.

—Frank Krewda

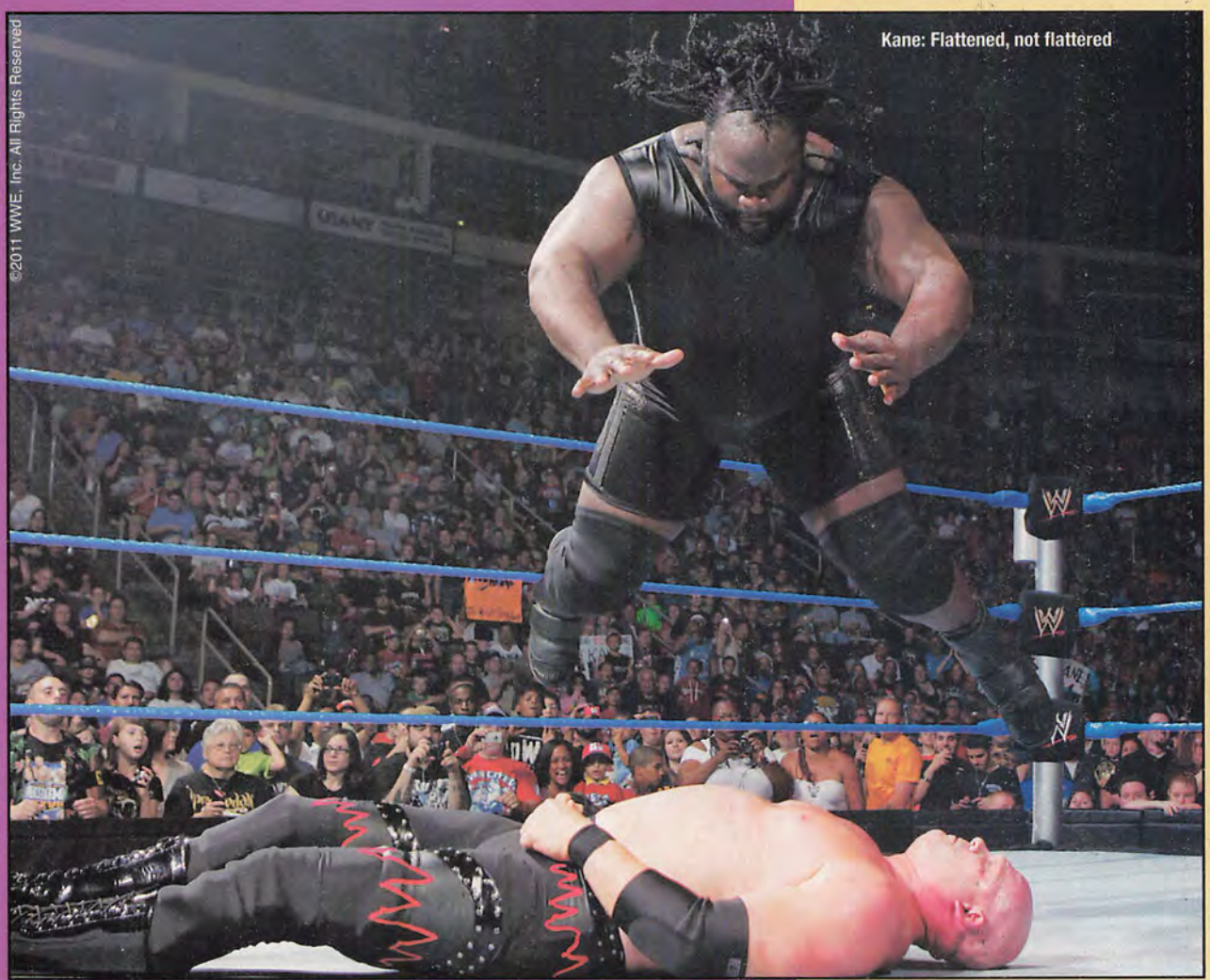
In Henry's case, frustrations over not winning a major WWE title during his 15-plus years with the company, not to mention some of the embarrassing storylines he was required to participate in over the years, were likely churning in his gut for some time.

So when Sheamus openly mocked "The World's Strongest Man" on both points in a late-winter promo on *Raw*, Henry responded violently.

Encouraged by the result of his ensuing rampage (Henry decimated Sheamus in a squash match later in the show), Henry most likely believes that directing his rage at *everyone* in WWE is his best—and perhaps, final—shot at success.

Of course, it is easy to point to Sheamus and say, "See what you've done with your big mouth?" In reality, though, Henry had most likely been pondering an attitude change long before Sheamus egged him on.

Even before he was traded to Smack-



Kane: Flattened, not flattered

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down, Henry no doubt, observed the ascension of another WWE giant, Kane.

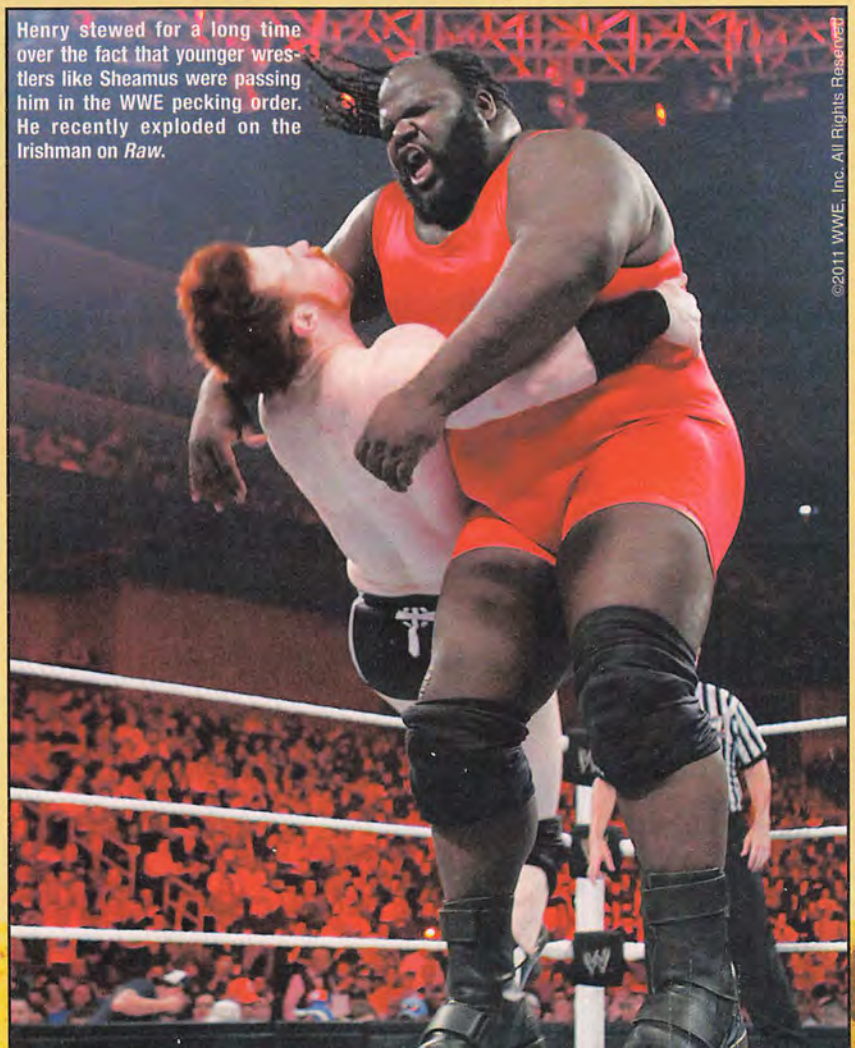
Much like Henry himself, Kane's WWE tenure had been riddled with ups and downs, and in the minds of some, underachievement. That was until Kane tapped into his own reserve of fury and took the World title from Mysterio Jr. in June 2010. By blazing a path of violence and destruction, Kane forged a five-month title reign, turning away the likes of The Undertaker, Jack Swagger, and Edge in the process. Seeing what such wanton violence did for Kane in the late stages of his career, Henry may have figured that by taking out Kane (as well as The Big Show, Sheamus, and some cameramen and technical crew), his fortunes could only improve.

"Obviously, Mark is trying to make a point," said Bourne. "Whether or not he's following Kane's blueprint, I'm not so certain. Either way, I'm staying out of his way. He's a big boy in a bad mood these days. Who knows, maybe unleashing his inner beast might just be the thing he needs to finally achieve his goals here in WWE."

Maybe. Unfortunately, though, Henry is 40 years old. While not necessarily old by wrestling standards, his current display of aggression would have served him much better had it occurred earlier in his career. At this point, time could run out on Henry, whether he rides his mean streak all the way to a major WWE championship or not. Exactly how many world titles and accolades "The World's Strongest Man" might have accumulated over the past 15 years had he approached wrestling with the same abject anger he's now displaying will never be known, but it's safe to say it would have been more than what he's accomplished to this point. □

Photo by Duane Long

During the "Sexual Chocolate" phase of his career, Henry engaged in a sham relationship with Mae Young. It was a low point WWE fans have not let Henry forget about over the years. It's no wonder "The World's Strongest Man" has exploded into violence.



Henry stewed for a long time over the fact that younger wrestlers like Sheamus were passing him in the WWE pecking order. He recently exploded on the Irishman on *Raw*.

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THE PRESSURE OF BEING BIG ANDY

Getting Past "Stone-Cold" Was The Easy Part!

After the grueling few months of training he got, Andy Leavine shrugged off the slightly violent initiation handed out to him by Steve Austin and Vince McMahon as the winner of *Tough Enough*. Does he realize there's much more and much worse hell to pay?

BY DAVE LENKER

AS HE STAGGERED down the aisle on the spring night that his life changed forever, two very conflicting thoughts/emotions were swirling through Andy Leavine's mind. *Wow, I'm an official, genuine, bona fide WWE Superstar,* he thought, the bitter taste of a "Stone-Cold" Stunner slowly starting to fade from

Photo by Will Hart/USA Network

his taste buds as he contemplated the wondrous possibilities of fame, fortune, and glory in the years ahead.

But then …

Oh my God, I'm an official, genuine, bona fide WWE Superstar, he thought soon thereafter, the aftertaste of that Stunner swirling back into his saliva as he contemplated the gigantic and intimidating mountain that extended seemingly into the heavens before him.

Not to mention all those deviously nasty mountain men who will undoubtedly get in his way from the moment he begins that climb.

Obviously, we don't really know what was going though Big Andy's mind

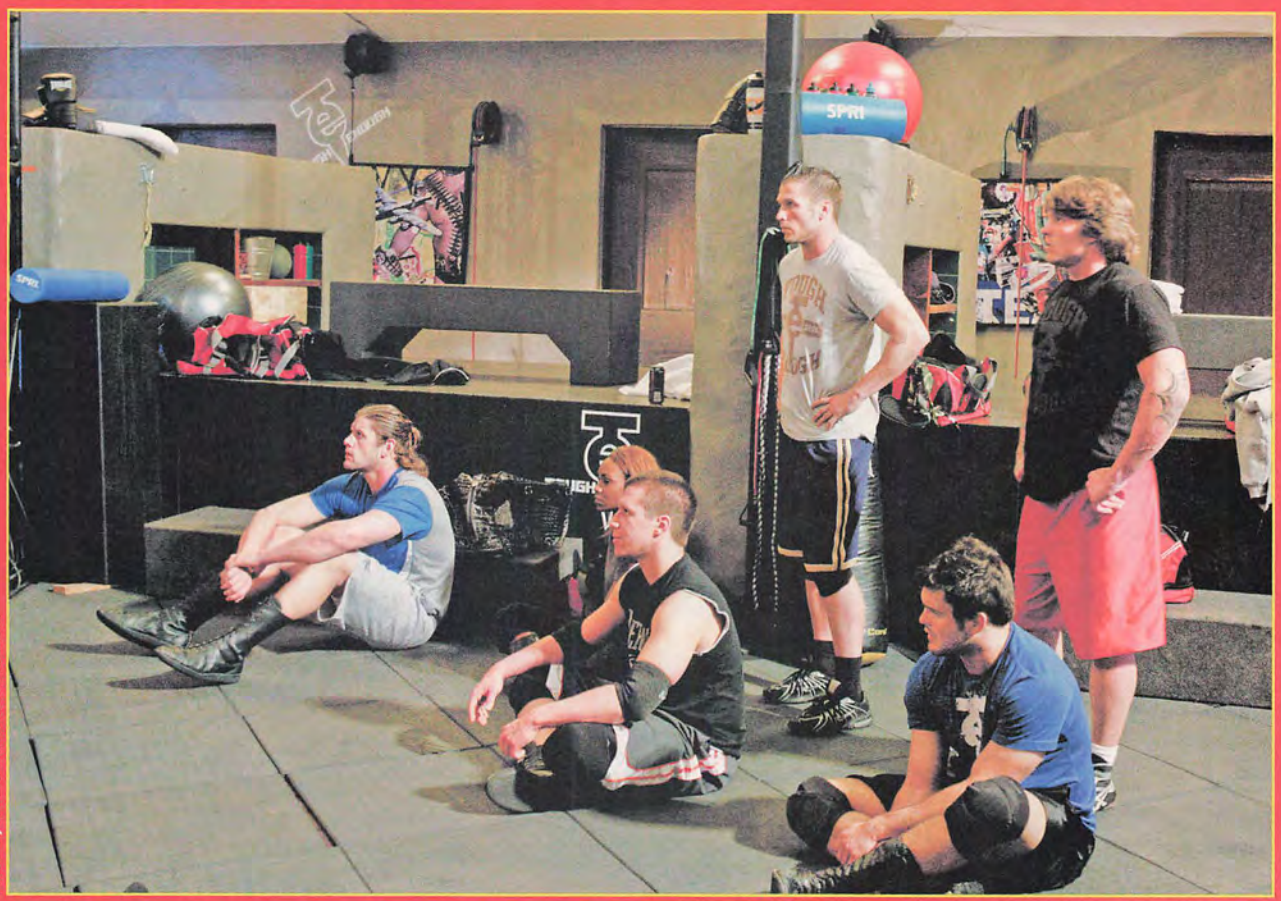

Photo by Nicole Wilder/USA Network

With eight contestants already eliminated, injured, or having quit, the final six (left to right, Andy Leavine, Christina Crawford, A.J. Kirsch, Luke Robinson, Martin Casaus, and Jeremiah Riggs) listen intently to their instructors.

Photo by Nicole Wilder/USA Network

Leavine braces for the impact of the onrushing Riggs as Bill DeMott looks on. With only MMA training, Riggs didn't have Big Andy's experience as a grappler.

during the night in which, in the span of 60 minutes or so, he heard Steve Austin and all the *Tough Enough* trainers talk mostly about how impressed they were with his performance as compared with that of his fellow *Tough Enough* finalist, the coolly named "Cool Hand Luke" (Luke Robinson). Maybe it was too surreal for him to be thinking anything.

In those 60 life-altering minutes, he received about all the glowing praise a kid just getting started should be able to handle, was officially announced as the winner of the fifth season of the reality show, got slapped to his knees by the biggest of his big bosses, Vince McMahon, and stunned to the canvas by the man who had just officially made his dream reality. But if, as he made his way to the back, he breathed a big sigh of relief and thought this was a dream finally realized, the end of an amazing journey, well, that's fine. It's entirely understandable. Let's just hope he allowed himself to enjoy it, to really revel in it, for a night, maybe two at most, then got back to work. Or, more accurately, *got started* on his work.

Tough Enough wasn't all that rough. Compared to what lies ahead, "Stone-Cold" took it easy on him, and big Bill DeMott was a purring pussycat.

Here comes the hard part—physically, mentally, emotionally, and, on some of the toughest of all the tough nights, maybe even spiritually.

Even though he was very impressive on *Tough Enough* and earned what he got, it's all very relative. In following the series from week to week, we all bore witness to not just everything he ultimately did right and the improvements and adjustments he deftly made, but all his shortcomings, too—all his missteps, his failures, his occasional embarrassing moments. He's light years from polished, maybe a year from even being solid. He's a figurative baby in this business, having logged just a few matches in Florida Championship Wrestling while briefly competing under a WWE developmental deal in 2010. His experience playing college football at Florida International University and half

Leavine contemplates what the life of a WWE Superstar can mean to his family's future. Once his dream of a pro football career ended, Andy dedicated himself to becoming a professional wrestler.

Photo by Nicole Wilder/USA Network

GOOD NEWS:
YOU DIDN'T WIN *TOUGH ENOUGH*!

Southern rocker Tom Petty famously lyricized on one of the songs on his 1979 album *Damn The Torpedoes* that "even the losers get lucky sometimes." Although the tune is more than three decades old, maybe "Even The Losers" should become the official theme song of WWE reality shows/contests. Retro is still in, right?

Actually, in WWE, the losers get lucky *most* times.

If you watched this season of *Tough Enough* all the way to the final credits each week, you could probably recite the mantra of virtually any contestant who got booted out of the house by ol' "Stone-Cold."

They were sad, maybe surprised, perhaps a little bitter, *blah, blah, blah*, but dammit, they weren't going to let their WWE dream die. We'd be seeing them again. Clichés, for sure, but maybe not so unrealistic.

Quick check of *Tough Enough* history. The past winners (in chronological order): Maven Huffman, Nidia Guenard, Linda Miles, Jackie Gayda-Haas, John Hennigan, Matt Cappotelli, and Daniel Puder. Hennigan is now John Morrison, one of the most exciting wrestlers on the Raw roster and possibly a future world champion. The rest? Cappotelli had a promising career cut short by a brain tumor, but one of them (Gayda) wrestled in one of the most embarrassingly bad matches in *Raw* history (against Trish Stratus). Another, Linda Miles, so frustrated then-OVW matchmaker Jim Cornette with her attitude that it's a wonder he didn't run screaming from the business, never to return. The rest? Seen any of their faces on a milk carton lately?

Meanwhile, among the *TE* also-rans, we have WWE broadcaster Josh Mathews, Chris Nowinski (whose promising WWE career was cut short by concussions), Ring of Honor's Kenny King, Matt Morgan of TNA, Marty "The Boogeyman" Wright, Nick Mitchell (once of The Spirit Squad), former Nexus member Skip Sheffield, and some smallish guy named Mike "The Miz" Mizanin.

Is there a future star among the Season 5 castoffs? Maybe, maybe not, but it just might be easier to develop outside the spotlight.

Incidentally, the old WWE Diva Search produced winners Christy Hemme, Ashley Massaro, Layla El, and Eve Torres but also gave us "losers" such as Michelle McCool (a seventh-place finisher), Maryse Oulette (another seventh-place finisher), and The Garcia (now Bella) Twins.

The clear message: Overall, the losers have as good a chance of succeeding in this business as the winners—and with a lot less pressure.

—Dave Lenker

Vince McMahon and Austin listen to Robinson make his case. Though he'd have to relinquish his *Tough Enough* belt, there may well be more important ones for "Cool Hand Luke" in the future.

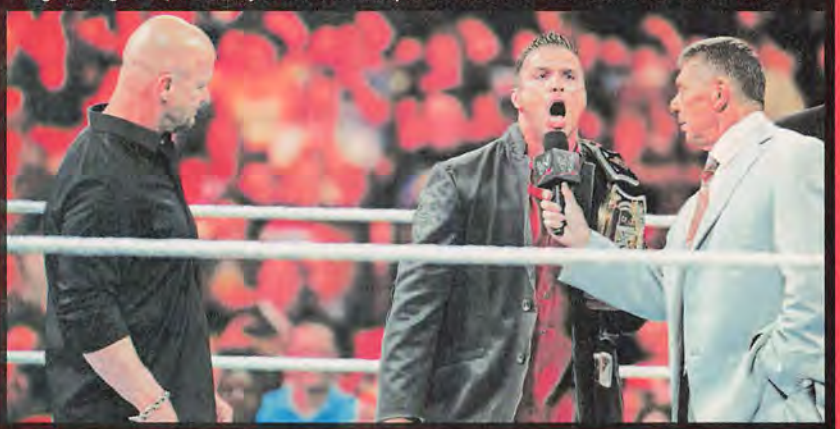

Photo by Will Hart/USA Network

a cup of coffee with the NFL's Miami Dolphins won't help the 23-year-old married father of two much. All his natural athleticism and charisma won't take him that far.

Hell, we've only been considering the physical wrestling aspect of the deal to this point.

Chris Jericho was a pretty seasoned veteran with extensive time logged in Japan, Mexico, ECW, and WCW, and he admits to struggling mightily in just about every facet of the game after he signed with WWE a dozen years ago.

Andy is essentially going to WWE from ... nowhere.

Picking up more and more of the physical nuances of the sport inside the ropes might be the easy part for young Mr. Leavine. There's a lot more of which he should be wary.

In case you didn't notice, there was a pretty considerable buzz surrounding *Tough Enough* this year. The show was back after a seven-year hiatus with a new and improved look and format. It snagged a cushy timeslot on the USA Network as a lead-in to *Raw* on Monday nights and drew consistently solid ratings. One of the biggest stars in WWE history signed on to host it and brought two high-profile trainers (Booker T and Trish Stratus) with him to assist the gritty and grizzled DeMott. The chairman took it upon himself to welcome Big Andy to the company (in a way your average executive doesn't welcome a new employee into the fold) on the night he won the contract.

Bottom line: WWE invested pretty heavily in the show and now in him.

Take your time, big Andy, no pressure to succeed ...

What, you don't think WWE will want him to jump on the fast track to the Raw or Smackdown roster, whether he's ready for that or not, do you? And when we inevitably do start to see him every Monday or Friday night, not many fans are going to be patient with him, either. If he can't deliver entertaining matches from the get-go, he'll hear about it.

Oh well, at least he will at all times have the unwavering support of all his now-*fellow* WWE competitors, who naturally must have been blown away by all the skill and potential he showed

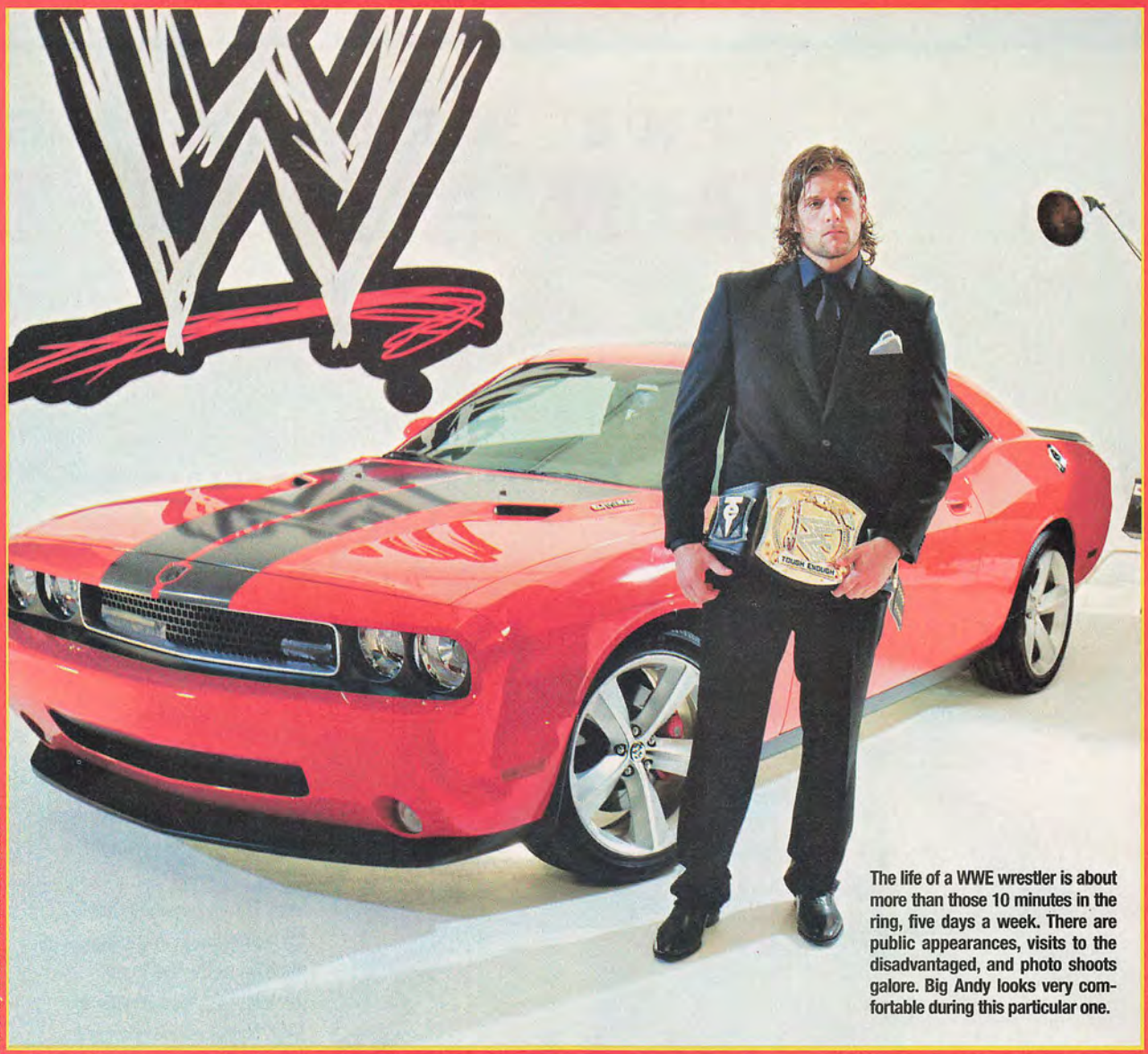

Photo by Nicole Wilder/USA Network

The life of a WWE wrestler is about more than those 10 minutes in the ring, five days a week. There are public appearances, visits to the disadvantaged, and photo shoots galore. Big Andy looks very comfortable during this particular one.

Photo by Nicole Wilder/USA Network

Things weren't easy for Trish Stratus or Steve Austin early in their careers, but perhaps nobody had it tougher than the man we named number-one in the "*PWI* 500" this year, The Miz. It would serve Big Andy well to sit down with Mike Mizanin and talk about what he can expect.

just on that little reality show. Yes, it's a good thing wrestlers in general don't insist that young bucks pay their dues before they reach the pinnacle of the profession. Right. He can find out about that from The Miz.

Just imagine what might happen if he unwittingly breaches some piece of lockerroom etiquette wrestlers are so famous for guarding with their lives. The bullying/hazing opportunities might be enticing enough to lure JBL out of retirement.

Let the fun begin, or as fellow *Tough Enough* winner John Morrison told us, "the adventure."

"Oh, Big Andy is going to have some big stories to tell after these next few years," Morrison chuckled. "Let's just leave it at that." □

THE WRESTLING ANALYST

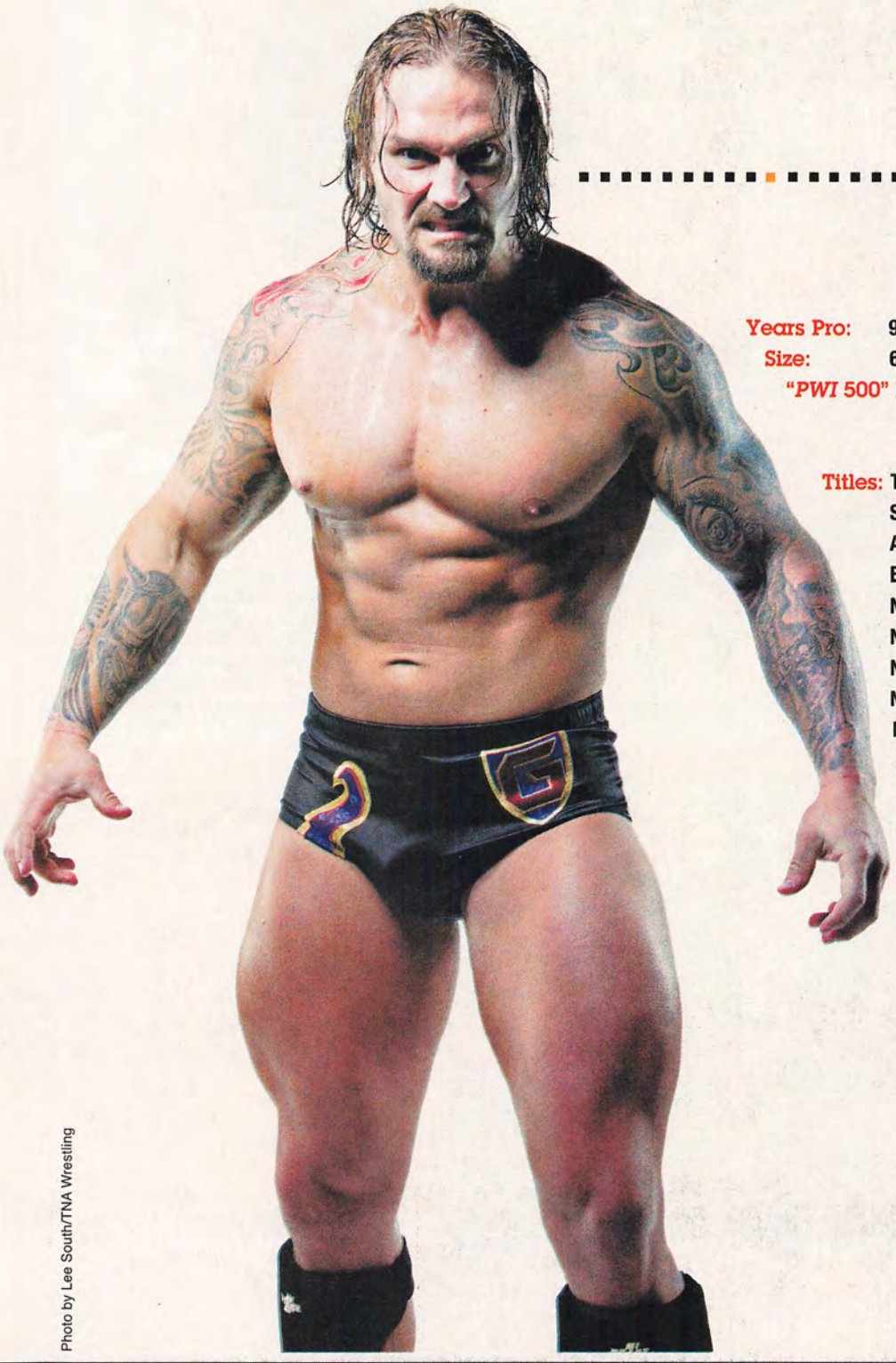

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

GUNNER

Years Pro: 9
Size: 6'2", 247
"*PWI* 500" Listings: 2010: 97
2009: 239
2008: 464
Titles: TNA TV
SAW International heavyweight
APW Chester heavyweight
ECCW Tag Team
NWA Future Legends Cup
NWA Anarchy heavyweight
NWA Anarchy Tag Team
NWA Mid-Atlantic Heritage
NWA National heavyweight
***PWI* Awards:** None

THE NUMBERS

OFFENSE (8.0): There are few rare gems more valuable than a bruiser who spent enough time on the indy circuit to fully develop an offensive repertoire, yet Gunner (aka Phill Shatter) has done just that. Make no mistake that he's primarily a power wrestler, but to ignore his speed, agility, and aerial expertise would be a grave mistake. He's surprisingly smooth in the ring.

DEFENSE (7.5): Gunner is easily one-to-two moves ahead of his opponent at any time in a match. Yet, that doesn't preclude him from the occasional defensive lapse, common with wrestlers who spent large portions of their careers as part of a tag team. He's become more cautious defensively as he ventures out as a singles wrestler in TNA.

EXPERIENCE (7.5): Spending nearly eight full years honing his craft against some of the best wrestlers not in either TNA or WWE has made Gunner a unique specimen at only 29 years old. Being thrust right into the main-event picture almost immediately after signing with TNA has only increased his stature and given him greater exposure. Though relatively untested till this point, he's making a lot of veterans take notice.

CONDITIONING (9.5): Simply put, the man is a beast. He's clearly used every ounce of his 242-pound frame to his advantage. Muscled from head to toe, Gunner has stayed impeccably fit since joining TNA, which is an improvement over his days on the indy circuit. Previously, Gunner had relied more on his bulk and natural size rather than focusing on improving and adding muscle mass.

STAMINA (7.5): Gunner is working toward becoming a more complete singles wrestler. In order to do so, he knows he must increase his stamina where he can now carry a 10-15 minute match on his own. While the strength and conditioning are already there, the stamina is still a work in progress.

SCIENCE (8.0): For those who fail to see the science behind brute strength and power wrestling, Gunner must be an anomaly. Sure, he relies on a steady diet of power bombs and spears, but they're strung together in a way that indicates Gunner is in control of the flow of a match. His ring acumen is what has allowed him to transition seamlessly between singles and tag competition.

POWER (9.5): Gunner uses all of his 6'2" build to his advantage. A strict power wrestler, Gunner possesses the strength to pull off a standing lift from nearly any position and the agility to do so without tipping off an opponent.

SPEED (8.0): At his best, Gunner is quick. He cuts down angles in the ring and forces opponents to come to him, oftentimes in less than ideal positions. His speed is a factor only as a supplement to his style and power. He may outwrestle or simply beat up an opponent, but he would be served well by not allowing a match to get away from him in the speed department.

ABILITY TO ABSORB PUNISHMENT (9.0): Heavyweights, historically, have been among the group most able to absorb and deliver punishment, and Gunner is no exception. He fares relatively well against bigger opponents, and extraordinarily well against those his size or smaller. His ability to rebound depends on the style of the opponent, with strikers giving him less of a problem than pure power wrestlers.

QUALITY OF OPPOSITION (8.0): Competing in NWA, Ring of Honor, and, now, TNA has broadened Gunner's level of opposition exponentially. He made a huge mark on the industry in 2010, when he beat Davey Richards for the NWA Future Legends Cup. He's now facing some of the industry's best competitors on a regular basis and handling himself quite well.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

① **A shoulder to the chest stops AJ Styles in his tracks. A combination of upper body and leg strength makes Gunner a very difficult matchup for smaller wrestlers.**

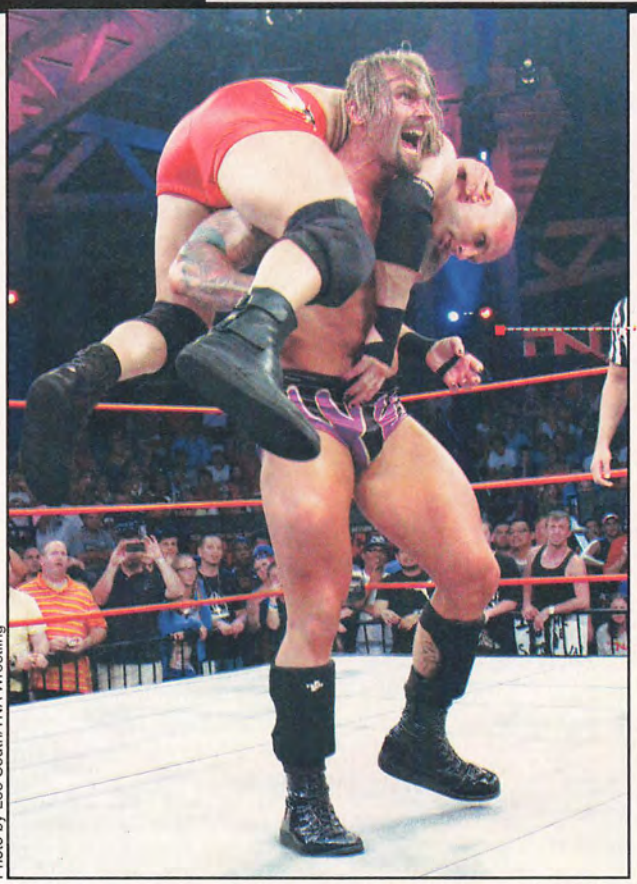

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

② Christopher Daniels was one wrestler who would not make the mistake of thinking Gunner was just a man who graduated from TNA Security. He's seen the man at his best on the indy circuit.

③ Many people first became aware of Phill Shatter when he beat indy darling (and reigning Ring of Honor champion) Davey Richards at the NWA Fanfest last September. Future legend? He's well on his way.

Photo by Christine Coons

THE Wrestling ANALYST

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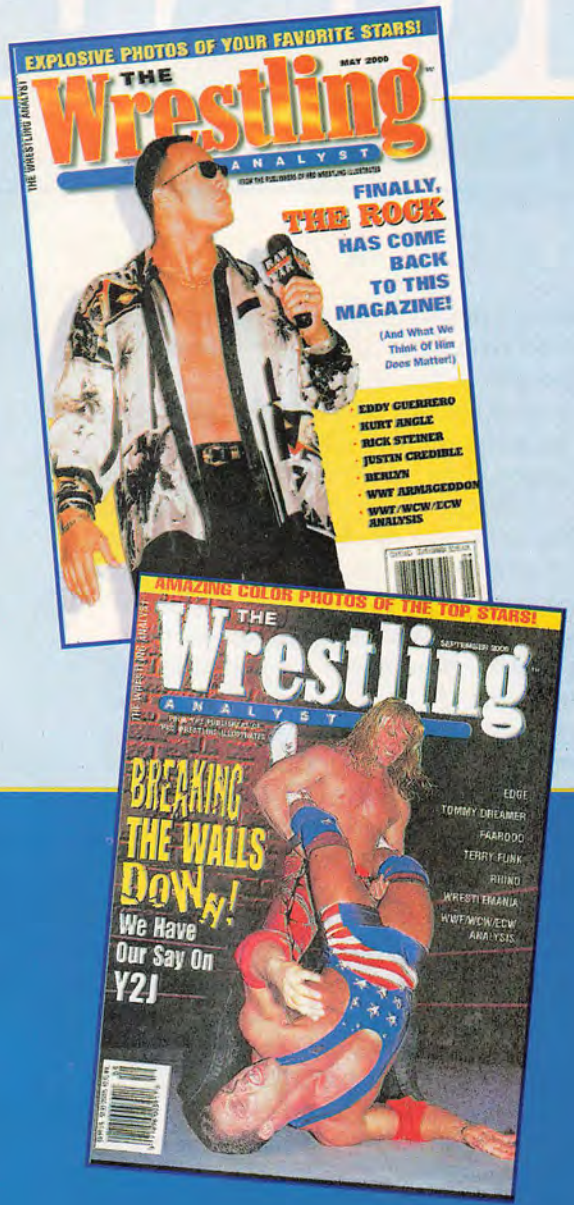

- ☐ **May 1998:** Shawn Michaels, Ken Shamrock, Dallas Page, Vader, Steiners, Sabu, Cactus Jack.
- ☐ **Sept. 1998:** Steve Austin, Booker T., Kane, Bam Bam Bigelow, Scott Norton, Perry Saturn, Tom Brandi, WrestleMania XIV.
- ☐ **Nov. 1998:** Bill Goldberg, Eddie Guerrero, Mark Mero, Headbangers, Brian Christopher, Lance Storm, D-Lo Brown, Bash at the Beach.
- ☐ **Jan. 1999:** Owen Hart , Bret Hart, Jeff Jarrett, Disco Inferno, Taka Michinoku, Chris Candido, Fit Finlay, SummerSlam.
- ☐ **March 1999:** New Age Outlaws, Mark Henry, The Giant, D.O.A., 2 Cold Scorpio, Tracy Smothers, Halloween Havoc.
- ☐ **May 1999:** Scott Hall, X-Pac, Lex Luger, Chris Jericho, Val Venis, Al Snow, Rob Van Dam, Starrcade.
- ☐ **July 1999:** Vince McMahon, Dudleys, Billy Kidman, Goldust, Konnan, Dan Severn, Valentine's Day Massacre, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **Sept. 1999:** Sable, Triple-H, Chris Benoit, Juventud Guerrera, Jerry Lynn, Bossman, Norman Smiley, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **Nov. 1999:** Sting, Godfather, Super Crazy, Darren Drozdov, Horace Hogan, Great American Bash, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **Jan. 2000:** Hulk Hogan, Steve Austin, Bruno Sammartino, Bob Backlund, Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels, Pedro Morales, Randy Savage.
- ☐ **March 2000:** Chyna, Sid Vicious, Steve Blackman, Yoshihiro Tajiri, Barry Windham, Unforgiven, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **May 2000:** The Rock, Eddie Guerrero, Kurt Angle, Rick Steiner, Justin Credible, Berlyn, Armageddon, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **July 2000:** Rikishi, Test, Madusa, Mike Awesome, Meng, Albert, Royal Rumble, WWF-WCW-ECW.
- ☐ **Sept. 2000:** Chris Jericho, Edge, Tommy Dreamer, Terry Funk, Rhino, WrestleMania, WWF-WCW-ECW.

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Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

⑤ Wrestlers of Daniels' stature are in a lot of trouble when Gunner can take away their legs and not have to concern himself with their speed.

④ Wrestlers who think Gunner is all about strength are in for a surprise when he displays his agility, balance, and speed. Mr. Anderson certainly appreciates Gunner's abilities—at least now he does.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

THE ANALYSIS

REPERTOIRE: Gunner could be easily written off as the prototypical power wrestler. The former U.S. serviceman finishes opponents off with a crushing power bomb known as "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" as well as an immobilizing facebuster out of a fireman's carry. Fortunately, though, there is much more to his repertoire than power moves. He's not opposed to throwing his body around, be it delivering an elbowdrop from the top rope or simply a flying bodypress. Gunner is breaking the mold of a traditional heavyweight in TNA and blending the strength approach with something of an X division style similar to that of a younger Samoa Joe.

STRENGTHS: Physically, Gunner benefits from his size and quickness in the ring. He's a wrestler that is considered, perhaps, a bit small for a heavyweight, yet that gives him the unique ability to straddle the line between traditional divisions. But perhaps the biggest strength that Gunner possesses at this stage of his TNA career is simply the element of the unknown. Despite his years on the indy circuit, Gunner is a relatively unknown commodity to much of the TNA roster. For the time being, he can utilize the unknown to his advantage and learn the TNA system while doing so.

WEAKNESSES: Gunner can be outworked by a more seasoned, agile opponent. If he gets too far away from what works for him—most notably, power—his effectiveness drops significantly. To date, he has minimized the major mistakes and enjoyed a nice run with TNA. which, historically, can either be a blessing or a curse. Too much success too soon can result in an air of overconfidence that has trapped many competitors throughout their careers. Gunner will need to continue going with what works, expand his repertoire to accommodate that, and never settle for being "good enough." His mike skills will have to improve, as well, if he intends to be a staple of the main-event picture.

DEFINING CAREER MOMENT: Some might choose his NWA Futures Cup victory over Richards, but his March 17, 2011, match to fill the TNA TV title vacancy was seen by millions, not hundreds. Following an injury to then-champion Abyss, the TNA TV title was vacated in early-March, paving the way for someone to immediately ascend the ranks and fill the void. On the St. Patrick's Day episode of *Impact,* Gunner squared-off with former partner Murphy and Rob Terry in a match to determine the new champion. In a fairly even-paced match where all participants enjoyed offensive outbursts, it was Gunner taking out Murphy with the fireman's carry facebuster to win his first singles title in TNA.

FUTURE: Gunner would be wise to examine the career trajectory of Samoa Joe. Tons of indy success and some immediate good fortune upon joining TNA made Joe the poster boy for the Orlando revolution. However, as history shows, that didn't end up being the case. Gunner has the makings of a star for TNA if given the chance to take advantage of the right opportunities. He's a strong, aggressive wrestler that the fans can easily support, and may be the type of dark horse the company has been lacking. He'll need a bit more time before being considered a favorite to win the TNA World title. □

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OFFICIAL RATINGS

TOP 10

1. **RANDY ORTON**
   245, St. Louis, MO
   (3) WWE World champion
2. **JOHN CENA**
   240, West Newbury, MA
   (1) WWE heavyweight champion
3. **STING**
   255, Venice Beach, CA
   (–) TNA World champion
4. **CM PUNK**
   222, Chicago, IL
   (–) No. 1 contender WWE heavyweight title
5. **CHRISTIAN**
   240, Toronto, ON
   (–) No. 1 contender WWE World title
6. **GO SHIOZAKI**
   240, Kumamoto, Japan
   (–) GHC heavyweight champion
7. **ALBERTO DEL RIO**
   237, Los Angeles, CA
   (–) No. 2 contender WWE heavyweight title
8. **ULTIMO GUERRERO**
   210, Gomez Palacio, Mex.
   (7) CMLL champion
9. **DAVEY RICHARDS**
   205, Othello, WA
   (–) Ring of Honor heavyweight champion
10. **JEFF JARRETT**
    235, Nashville, TN
    (–) AAA champion

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

JEFF JARRETT

TAG TEAMS

1. **DAVID OTUNGA & MICHAEL McGILLICUTTY**
   Combined weight: 474 pounds
   (2) WWE tag team champions
2. **GIANT BERNARD & KARL ANDERSON**
   Combined weight: 590 pounds
   (–) IWGP, GHC tag team champions
3. **CHARLIE HAAS & SHELTON BENJAMIN**
   Combined weight: 497 pounds
   (3) ROH tag team champions
4. **CHRIS HERO & CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI**
   Combined weight: 475 pounds
   (4) No. 1 contenders ROH tag team title
5. **ALEX SHELLEY & JAMES STORM**
   Combined weight: 445 pounds
   (–) TNA World tag team champions
6. **JON DAVIS & KORY CHAVIS**
   Combined weight: 449 pounds
   (8) NWA tag team champions
7. **BIG E LANGSTON & CALVIN RAINES**
   Combined weight: 549 pounds
   (7) FCW tag team champions
8. **MASATO YOSHINO & PAC**
   (9) Combined weight: 331 pounds
   (3) DGUSA Open the United Gate champions
9. **KENZO & KEIJI MUTO**
   Combined weight: 490 pounds
   (–)All Japan Unified tag team champions
10. **SANTINO MARELLA & VLADIMIR KOZLOV**
    Combined weight: 529 pounds
    (–) No. 1 contenders WWE tag team title

RAW

WWE Champion:
JOHN CENA
(C) 240, West Newbury, MA

1—**CM PUNK**
(7) 222, Chicago, IL
2—**ALBERTO DEL RIO**
(3) 240, San Luis Potosi, Mexico
3—**THE MIZ**
(2) 231, Cleveland, OH
4—**ALEX RILEY**
(–) 251, Washington, DC
5—**DOLPH ZIGGLER**
(5) 221, Hollywood, CA
6—**REY MYSTERIO JR.**
(6) 175, San Diego, CA
7—**R-TRUTH**
(1) 235, Charlotte, NC
8—**THE BIG SHOW**
(9) 485, Tampa, FL
9—**KOFI KINGSTON**
(4) 221, Ghana, West Africa
10—**JACK SWAGGER**
(–) 263, Perry, OK

SMACKDOWN

World Champion:
RANDY ORTON
(C) 245, St. Louis, MO

1—**CHRISTIAN**
(2) 240, Toronto, ON
2—**EZEKIEL JACKSON**
(–) 309, Guyana
3—**DANIEL BRYAN**
(6) 190, Aberdeen, WA
4—**SHEAMUS**
(1) 280, Dublin, Ireland
5—**WADE BARRETT**
(3) 265, Manchester, England
6—**MARK HENRY**
(9) 392, Silsbee, TX
7—**CODY RHODES**
(5) 223, Marietta, GA
8—**KANE**
(4) 323, Hell
9—**TED DiBIASE JR.**
(–) 235, West Palm Beach, FL
10—**DREW McINTYRE**
(8) 252, Ayr, Scotland

TNA

World Champion:
STING
(C) 255, Venice Beach, CA

1—**MR. ANDERSON**
(2) 243, Green Bay, WI
2—**ROB VAN DAM**
(1) 237, Los Angeles, CA
3—**JEFF JARRETT**
(4) 235, Nashville, TN
4—**CRIMSON**
(–) 252, Cleveland, OH
5—**KURT ANGLE**
(3) 240, Pittsburgh, PA
6—**BRIAN KENDRICK**
(–) 184, Venice Beach, CA
7—**ERIC YOUNG**
(10) 225, Florence, ON
8—**GUNNER**
(–) 245, Paris Island, SC
9—**BULLY RAY**
(8) 296, Hell's Kitchen, NY
10—**SAMOA JOE**
(9) 280, Los Angeles, CA

RING OF HONOR

Champion:
DAVEY RICHARDS
(2) 205, Othello, WA

1—**EDDIE EDWARDS**
(C) 214, Boston, MA
2—**EL GENERICO**
(4) 180, Tijuana, Mexico
3—**RODERICK STRONG**
(3) 215, Tampa, FL
4—**STEVE CORINO**
(–) 242, Sea Isle City, NJ
5—**CHRISTOPHER DANIELS**
(1) 224, Los Angeles, CA
6—**KYLE O'REILLY**
(–) 195, Vancouver, BC
7—**MIKE ELGIN**
(–) 265, Toronto, ON
8—**MIKE BENNETT**
(10) 225, Carver, MA
9—**TOMMASO CIAMPA**
(–) 199, Boston, MA
10—**ADAM COLE**
(–) 190, Panama City, FL

Top **10** and tag team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (—) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder of the issue.

FOR PERIOD ENDED JULY 15, 2011

COMBAT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—Devon Moore; 1—Adam Cole; 2—Sami Callihan; 3—MASADA; 4—Jake Crist; 5—Drake Younger; 6—Scotty Vortekz; 7—Danny Havoc; 8—A.R. Fox; 9—BLK Jeez; 10—Ryan McBride.

DRAGON GATE USA: Champion—YAMATO; 1—CIMA; 2—Johnny Gargano; 3—PAC; 4—Naruki Doi; 5—Ricochet; 6—Masaaki Mochizuki; 7—Chuck Taylor; 8—Masato Yoshino; 9—Akira Tozawa; 10—Austin Aries.

DREAMWAVE: Champion—Acid; 1—Hammett; 2—Austin Roberts; 3—Mason Beck; 4—Colt Cabana; 5—Dan Lawrence; 6—Nick Brubaker; 7—Silas Young; 8—Marshe Rockett; 9—Steve Boz; 10—Shane Hollister.

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Papadon; 1—Chris Wylde; 2—Bazooka Joe; 3—Kekoa the Flyin' Hawaiian; 4—Kid America; 5—Russian Assassin; 6—Damian Dragon; 7—Matt Saigon; 8—Shockwave the Robot; 9—Mr. Ooh La La; 10—AHTU.

EVOLVE: Champion—Vacant; 1—Johnny Gargano; 2—Chuck Taylor; 3—Sami Callihan; 4—A.R. Fox; 5—Ricochet; 6—Drake Younger; 7—Bobby Fish; 8—Silas Young; 9—Austin Aries; 10—Shiima Xion.

FLORIDA CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Bo Rotundo; 1—Lucky Cannon; 2—Seth Rollins; 3—Damien Sandow; 4—Leo Kruger; 5—Richie Steamboat; 6—Jinder Mahal; 7—Xavier Woods; 8—Roman Leakee; 9—Titus O'Neil; 10—Alexander Rusev.

FULL IMPACT PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Vacant; 1—Sami Callahan; 2—Bobby Fish; 3—Caleb Konley; 4—A.R. Fox; 5—Rich Swann; 6—Manu; 7—Craig Classic; 8—Chris Gray; 9—Lince Dorado; 10—Austin Aries.

NWA CHATTANOOGA: Champion—Tank; 1—Jimmy Rave; 2—Ace Rockwell; 3—Shaun Tempers; 4—Andrew Alexander; 5—Seven; 6—Kyle Matthews; 7—Chrisjen Hayme; 8—Adam Jacobs; 9—Patrick Bentley; 10—Corey Hollis.

PLATINUM CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Grotesque; 1—Chip Day; 2—The Vandal; 3—Tommy Daniels; 4—Mason; 5—Sylar Cross; 6—Kyle Matthews; 7—Lee Roy; 8—Seth Delay; 9—Marko Polo; 10—Davey Richards.

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA: Champion—Claudio Castagnoli; 1—Chris Hero; 2—Low-Ki; 3—Chuck Taylor; 4—Peter Avalon; 5—Joey Ryan; 6—Kevin Steen; 7—Roderick Strong; 8—Willie Mack; 9—Brandon Cutler; 10—Paul London.

SHOWTIME ALL-STAR WRESTLING: Champion—Kid Kash; 1—Chase Stevens; 2—Tommy Mercer; 3—Drew Haskins; 4—Chris Michaels; 5—Ryan Genesis; 6—Vordell Walker; 7—Johnny Bandana; 8—JP Magnum; 9—Jeff Daniels; 10—Cody Michaels.

WOMEN SUPERSTARS UNCENSORED: Champion—Mercedes Martinez; 1—Lexxus; 2—Brittney Savage; 3—Jessicka Havok; 4—Serena; 5—Alicia; 6—Nikki Roxx; 7—Kristin Astara; 8—Jazz; 9—Sassy Stephie; 10—Rain.

NWA

Champion:
VACANT

1—CHANCE PROPHET
(2) 225, Sacramento, CA
2—COLT CABANA
(1) 233, Chicago, IL
3—SHAUN TEMPERS
(–) 232, Cornelia, GA
4—DAMIEN WAYNE
(5) 237, Hampton, VA
5—TONY BARONI
(–) 214, Surrey, BC
6—ACE ROCKWELL
(9) 212, Atlanta, GA
7—SADIST
(–) 250, Parts Unknown
8—ADAM PEARCE
(3) 248, San Diego, CA
9—RAYOUJI SAI
(–) 230, Osaka, Japan
10—JIMMY RAVE
(–) 200, Atlanta, GA

JAPAN

1—GO SHIOZAKI
(6) 240, Kumamoto, Japan
GHC heavyweight champion
2—HIROSHI TANAHASHI
(1) 230, Ogaki, Japan
IWGP heavyweight champion
3—SUWAMA
(3) 260, Kanagawa, Japan
AJPW Triple Crown champion
4—HIROOKI GOTO
(4) 227, Kuwana, Japan
5—MVP
(7) 259, Miami, Florida
6—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(9) 245, Mineyama, Japan
7—NAOMICHI MARUFUJI
(5) 190, Saitama, Japan
8—KOTA IBUSHI
(–) 190, Kagoshima, Japan
9—TIGER MASK IV
(–) 180, Urayusa, Japan
10—KAI
(–) 191, Yokohama, Japan

MEXICO

1—L.A. PARK
(–) 255, Monterrey, Mexico
2—LA MASCARA
(–)186 Mexico City, Mexico
3—ULTIMO GUERRERO
(1) 210, Gómez Palacio, Mexico
CMLL champion
4—DR. WAGNER JR.
(6) 216, Torreón, Mexico
5—AVERNO
(9) 174 Mexico City, Mexico
6—JEFF JARRETT
(–) 230, Nashville, TN
AAA Champion
7—ATLANTIS
(–) 202, Los Altos, Mexico
8—VIRUS
(–) 175, Mexico City, Mexico
9—EL MESIAS
(–) 245, Bayamón, Puerto Rico
10—EXTREME TIGER
(–)148, Tijuana, Baja California

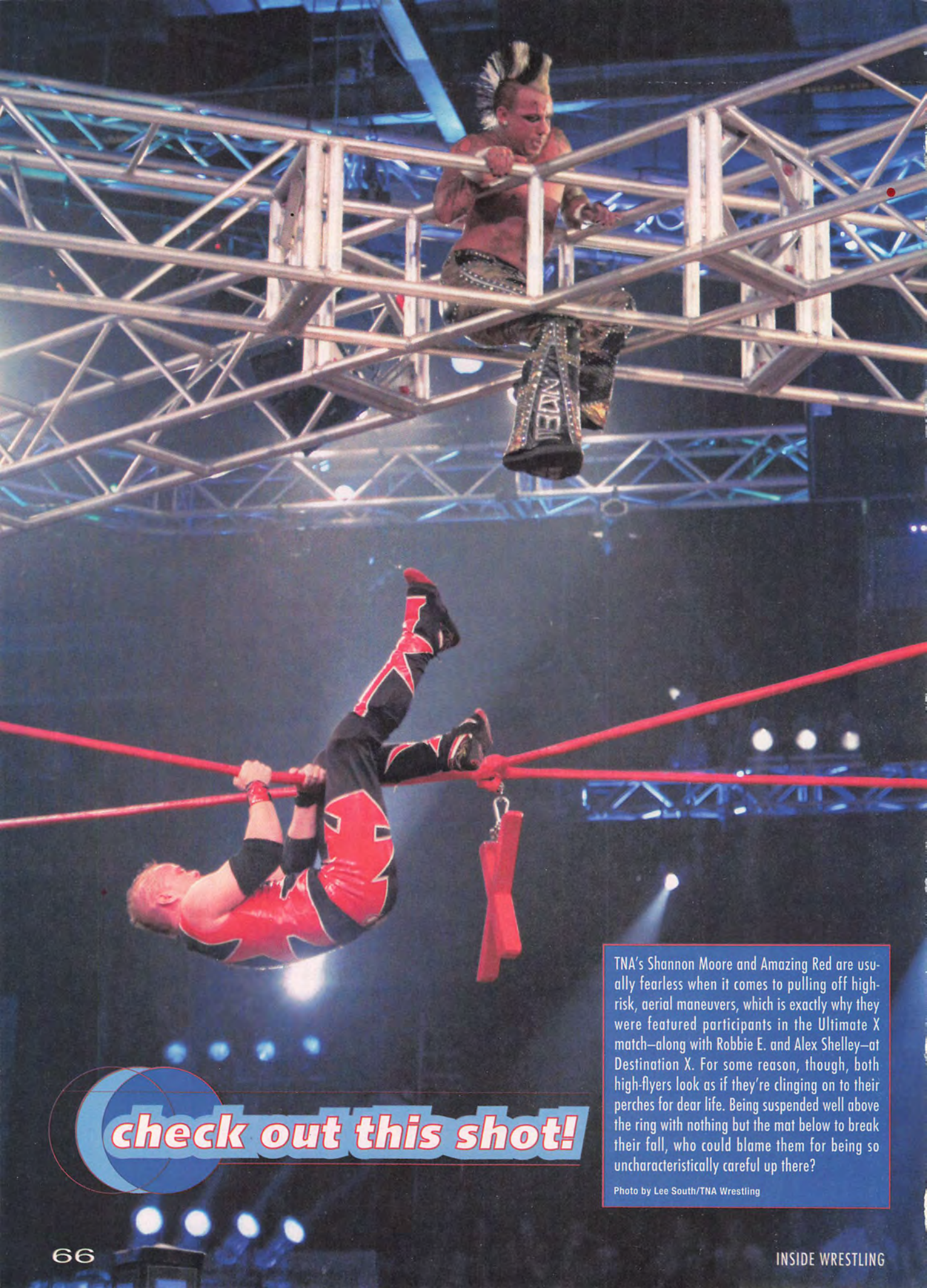
WOMEN

1—KELLY KELLY
(10) 108, Jacksonville, FL
WWE Divas champion
2—MICKIE JAMES
(1) 128, Richmond, VA
TNA Knockouts champion
3—MERCEDES MARTINEZ
(3) 147, Waterbury, CT
4—MADISON EAGLES
(2) 160, Sydney, Australia
5—BRITTNEY SAVAGE
(–) 155, Los Angeles, CA
6—BRITTANY FORCE
(6) 130, Johnstown, PA
7—JESSICKA HAVOK
(9) 175, Canton, OH
8—SASSY STEPHIE
(7) 122, Akron, OH
9—KACEE CARLISLE
(–) 155, San Francisco, CA
10—TASHA SIMONE
(8) 156, Dallas, TX

REMEMBER HIM?

Though WWE Vice President of Talent Relations John Laurinaitis (pictured standing as Johnny Ace with Shane Douglas 22 years ago) sports a much more corporate look these days, we can't help but wonder if the "Dynamic Dude" in him ever gets the urge to whip out the ol' skateboard and shred the sidewalks of downtown Stamford, Connecticut.

Photo by Eddie Cheslock



check out this shot!

TNA's Shannon Moore and Amazing Red are usually fearless when it comes to pulling off high-risk, aerial maneuvers, which is exactly why they were featured participants in the Ultimate X match–along with Robbie E. and Alex Shelley–at Destination X. For some reason, though, both high-flyers look as if they're clinging on to their perches for dear life. Being suspended well above the ring with nothing but the mat below to break their fall, who could blame them for being so uncharacteristically careful up there?

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

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ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended July 15, 2011

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

ALL JAPAN UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KEIJI MUTO & KENZO
(June 19, 2011; defeated Akebono & Ryota Hama to win the vacant title; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KAI
(June 19, 2011; defeated Shuji Kondo to win vacant title; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: SUWAMA
(August 29, 2010; from Ryota Hama; Tokyo, Japan)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: PAPADON
(March 5, 2011; from Mega; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: CHRIS WYLDE
(December 4, 2010; won a battle royal for vacant title, last eliminating Mozart Fontaine; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MATT SAIGON & DAMIEN DRAGON
(May 7, 2011; beat Christopher Rockwell & Sam Shields to win vacant title; Newark, DE)

FCW FLORIDA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BO ROTUNDO
(May 19, 2011; from Lucky Cannon; Tampa, FL)

FCW FLORIDA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: CALVIN RAINES & BIG E LANGSTON
(May 12, 2011; from Seth Rollins & Richie Steamboat; Miami, FL)

FCW FLORIDA DIVAS CHAMPION: AKSANA
(April 7, 2011; from AJ Lee; Tampa, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: VACANT
(April 12, 2011; title vacated by Jon Moxley)

FULL IMPACT PRO TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JON DAVIS & KORY CHAVIS
(July 31, 2010; from Chris Gray & Tommy Taylor; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO FLORIDA HERITAGE CHAMPION: JAKE MANNING
(July 31, 2010; from Brad Allen; Crystal River, FL)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: HIROSHI TANAHASHI
(January 4, 2011; from Satoshi Kojima; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: GIANT BERNARD & KARL ANDERSON
(June 19, 2010; from Wataru Inoue & Yuji Nagata; Osaka, Japan)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KOTA IBUSHI
(June 18, 2011; from Prince Devitt; Osaka, Japan)

NWA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: VACANT
(July 11, 2011; The Sheik is stripped of title)

NWA JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: VACANT
(July 11, 2011; Craig Classic vacates title)

NWA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KORY CHAVIS & JON DAVIS
(May 15, 2011; from A.J. Steele & Murder-One; Warner Robins, GA)

NWA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: TASHA SIMONE
(November 6, 2010; beat Rachel for vacant title; Lebanon, TX)

OVW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: JAYSON WAYNE
(July 2, 2011; beat Mike Mondo in a tournament final; Louisville, KY)

OVW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TRAILER PARK TRASH & MR. BLACK
(June 15, 2011; from Ted McNaler & Adam Revolver; Louisville, KY)

OVW TV CHAMPION: RUDY SWITCHBLADE
(May 25, 2011; from Jamin Olivencia; Louisville, KY)

OVW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: LADY JOJO
(August 28, 2010; from Holly Blossom; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI
(October 9, 2010; beat Brandon Gatson, Chris Hero, and Joey Ryan in a four-way for vacant title; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: THE YOUNG BUCKS
(April 9, 2011; from Paul London & El Generico; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: GO SHIOZAKI
(July 10, 2011; from Takashi Sugiura; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KOTARO SUZUKI
(December 5, 2010; from Yoshinobu Kanemaru; Osaka, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: GIANT BERNARD & KARL ANDERSON
(June 18, 2011; from Takuma Sano & Yoshihiro Takayama; Osaka, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPION: DAVEY RICHARDS
(June 26, 2011; from Eddie Edwards; New York, NY)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: SHELTON BENJMAIN & CHARLIE HAAS
(April 1, 2011; from Chris Hero & Claudio Castagnoli; Atlanta, GA)

RING OF HONOR TV CHAMPION: EL GENERICO
(June 26, 2011; from Christopher Daniels; New York, NY)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: MADISON EAGLES
(April 11, 2010; from MsChif; Berwyn, IL)

TNA TV CHAMPION: ERIC YOUNG
(May 17, 2011; from Gunner; Orlando, FL)

TNA KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION: MICKIE JAMES
(April 17, 2011; from Madison Rayne; Cincinnati, OH)

TNA KNOCKOUTS TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MISS TESSMACHER & TARA
(July 12, 2011; from Sarita & Rosita; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: STING
(July 11, 2011; from Mr. Anderson, Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ROBERT ROODE & JAMES STORM
(January 9, 2011; from Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley; Orlando, FL)

TNA X DIVISION CHAMPION: BRIAN KENDRICK
(July 10, 2011; from Abyss; Orlando, FL)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: EZEKIEL JACKSON
(June 19, 2011; from Wade Barrett; Washington, DC)

WWE WORLD CHAMPION: RANDY ORTON
(May 3, 2011; from Christian; Orlando, FL)

WWE TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: DAVID OTUNGA & MICHAEL McGILLICUTTY
(May 23, 2011; from The Big Show & Kane; Portland, OR)

WWE CHAMPION: JOHN CENA
(May 1, 2011; from The Miz; Tampa, FL)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: DOLPH ZIGGLER
(June 19, 2011; from Kofi Kingston; Washington, DC)

WWE DIVAS CHAMPION: KELLY KELLY
(June 27, 2011; from Brie Bella; Las Vegas, NV)

HICKS: Aside from the points raised by Frank and Al, TNA could end up hurting itself by watering down the product to accommodate all the new X division wrestlers. Shorter matches, more multi-person tag team bouts. The product could be hurt simply because of the numbers.

CASTLE: Stu, the biggest positive out of all of this is that TNA gives itself access to many of the best X division-style wrestlers in the world. If it can afford to allow this mass of humanity to go on for a few months, the herd may thin itself and the promotion could end up with a handful of great workers. Maybe even a star or two.

KREWDA: Another positive is actually what's going on in this room today. By doing something like expanding its X division roster, TNA is giving fans who are unimpressed with the heavyweight scene something to talk about. It's easy to forget just how important the X division was to TNA five, six years ago. The focus shifted away from what made it special to, most likely, competition with WWE. This could serve as a nice re-boot for the X division, overall.

Shiima Xion (on mat), Jack Evans (in air), and Low-Ki are gifted athletes, but their presence in TNA adds more bodies to an already crowded roster. Can these men truly flourish in TNA with just two hours of weekly air time?

SAKS: Excellent arguments, all of you. Final thoughts from each of you: What does this new look mean for the X division moving forward, Al?

CASTLE: I'm on board with anything that places the emphasis back on wrestling. Yes, there might be some issues with trying to manage a loaded division, but let the guys settle it in the ring. The cream will rise.

KREWDA: My initial instinct is to think that this is good because it gets more guys working and provides wrestlers who may not have had the exposure level of some of their peers with television time. I don't believe this is what TNA has envisioned for the long-term of the division and, as I stated earlier, it feels more like an audition than anything else. Think of it, in the interim, as TNA's version of *Tough Enough*, only it occurs in much smaller segments, with less television drama and smack in the middle of its flagship program.

HICKS: I tend to agree with something you said at the top of this discussion, that it's great to see so many smaller indy wrestlers getting a shot at working for one of the major U.S. promotions. My hope is that this is really just the start of a new trend in TNA. TNA is being proactive and bringing the great talent that many fans would never be able to see and allowing the wrestling—hopefully—to speak for itself. It's a good move for TNA.

SAKS: All the prognostication as to how TNA will fare can only possibly be reviewed after the new-look X division has time to take hold. It's an interesting move at this point, but something that they likely had to examine, given the transitive nature of wrestlers in the industry. TNA couldn't afford to miss out on another CM Punk or similar star in the making, so it makes a lot of sense. Still, the onus is now on TNA to use the X division roster wisely; otherwise they risk not only missing out on that hidden gem, but also losing the attention of a fan base pulling for its continued success. Thanks, guys! □

"One can only hope that TNA is putting the X division behind the slogan 'Wrestling Matters.' These X division guys are as good as anybody in the business."

—Al Castle

division at those times, and, naturally, some wrestlers are hot enough that they stick with the promotion for a while afterward. To assume that TNA hasn't learned something from its past experience with this isn't all that fair.

SAKS: So, you're saying that TNA should be given an opportunity to show that it can effectively manage the increased X division roster before it's wholly written off as a potential problem, correct?

HICKS: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

AL CASTLE: One can only hope that TNA is putting the X division behind the slogan "Wrestling Matters." These X division guys are as good as anybody in the business. It's the perfect time to shine the spotlight on them.

KREWDA: I still have my concerns. It's great to have a solid roster of talent, but if you don't use it correctly, it's an amazing waste.

SAKS: Understood, but then is it fair to punish TNA for the perceived misdirected use of talent in the past? Brady, let's pick it back up with you.

HICKS: In some cases, yes. But with the X division, it's more a case of give these guys the ball and let them run with it. If outside forces like Eric Bischoff aren't trying to force a fumble, these guys will bring it to the house.

CASTLE: True, but if TNA wants to step off the beaten path with the X division, the one thing it must do is establish a pecking order within the division, right up front.

SAKS: Interesting perspective, Al. Go on.

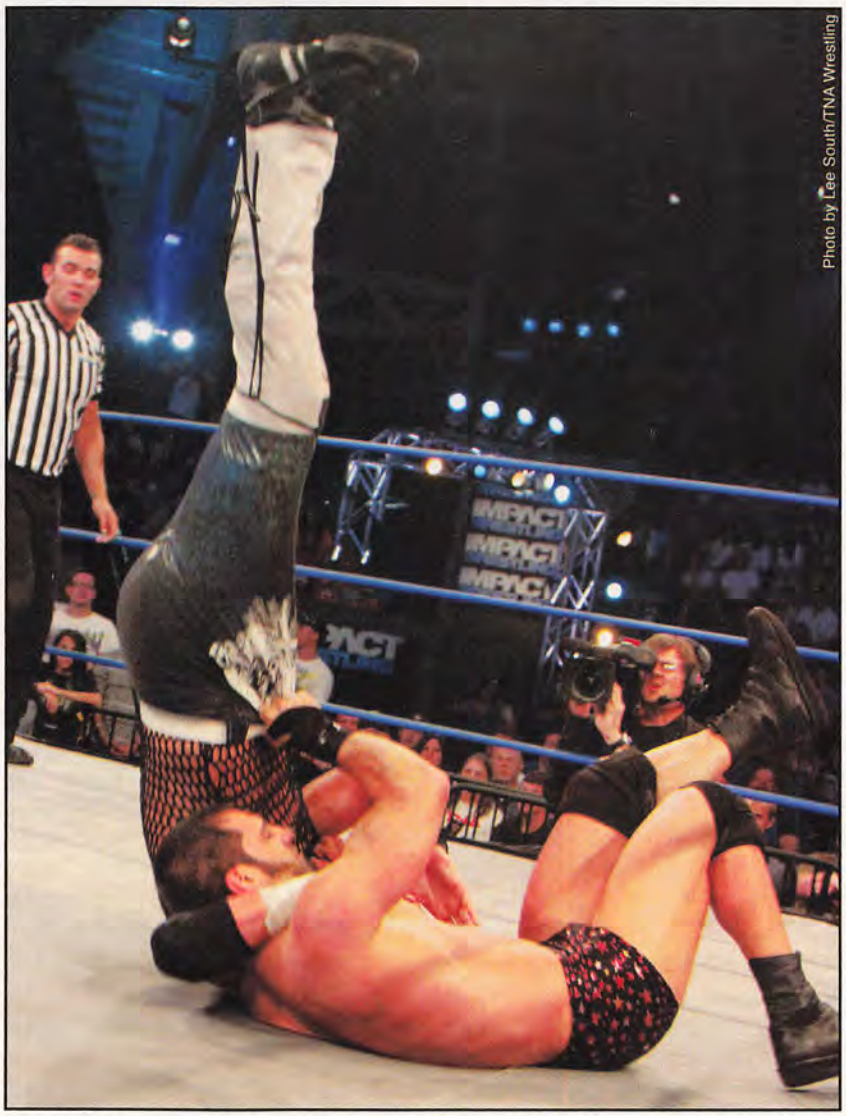
CASTLE: When you have this many guys fighting for one title, it's easy to get lost in the mix. My personal opinion is that the X division was at its strongest when there was a clear face of the group. Styles, Samoa Joe, Daniels. When one came from many, and feuds were manageable, the division was excellent.

SAKS: True, but when you have a lot of quality wrestlers and very little time to showcase them, every match is basically an audition. Wouldn't that then lead to better quality and entertainment value overall?

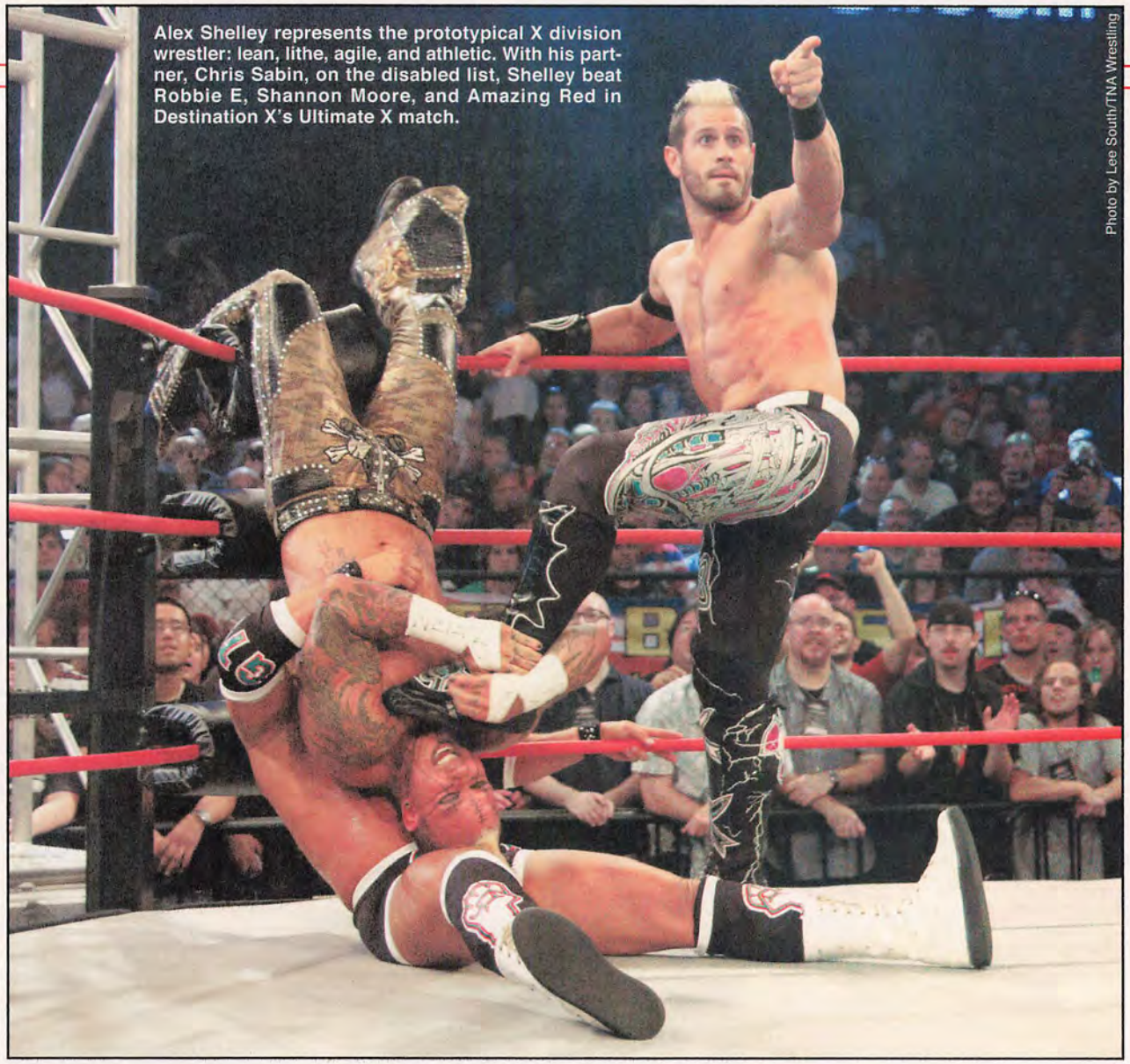
KREWDA: A lot of the success of this new wave of X division talent will depend heavily on who the fans choose to support, though. You may have guys out there who aren't as talented as others, yet throw a few massive, attention-grabbing spots out when they're on television. Those are the guys I worry about not having staying power in the long run.

CASTLE: Exactly. And if that happens, you are once again stuck with a loaded roster of guys standing around or engaging in backstage segments, but never doing anything meaningful.

SAKS: Everyone is making very valid points, but let's turn our attention to the opposing view for a moment. Frank, Al, how is this a positive for TNA? Brady, how could the influx end up hurting them?



Former TNA wrestlers Austin Aries and Jimmy Rave were welcomed back to the fold recently, but only "A-Double" signed a deal with TNA. If TNA manages the X division properly, Aries will get plenty of exposure.



Alex Shelley represents the prototypical X division wrestler: lean, lithe, agile, and athletic. With his partner, Chris Sabin, on the disabled list, Shelley beat Robbie E, Shannon Moore, and Amazing Red in Destination X's Ultimate X match.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

What are the possible ramifications for the X division, given the sudden surge of quality wrestlers now becoming part of the active roster? Publisher Stu Saks waded through the possibilities with Editor-in-Chief Frank Krewda, Contributing Writer Brady Hicks, and Senior Writer Al Castle.

STU SAKS: Recently, we've seen the return of men like Austin Aries, Jimmy Rave, Jack Evans, as well as the debut of Shiima Xion in TNA's X division. There have also been dark match appearances from indy standouts Johnny Gargano, Josh Daniels, and Bobby Shields. As far as I know, only Aries has signed with TNA, but assuming all these men catch on, what happens to the X division, Frank?

FRANK KREWDA: It might sound counter-intuitive to say that this could actually be a negative. I really don't want to put a damper on what should be a great thing. Not long ago, when people thought of TNA, the first thing that came to mind was the fantastic X division. But—

SAKS: I knew a "but" was coming.

KREWDA: My fear with this influx of wrestlers to the X division is pretty basic: There's not nearly enough time to use them in meaningful and effective ways. I feel like we're headed into a situation where guys will come in to TNA, guns a-blazin', and are then lost in the shuffle within two months.

BRADY HICKS: Sure, Frank, that's possible. But talk about looking at the glass half-empty. You're looking a full glass and still seeing a negative.

SAKS: Well put, Brady. TNA can't buy a break from some reporters. Come on, already!

HICKS: I understand the sentiment, Stu. Essentially, TNA has been in this position before, especially during the high points of the World X Cup years. There's always a renewed focus on the

editors' roundtable

What Does The Influx Of So Many New X Division Wrestlers Mean For The Division?

"I feel like we're headed into a situation where guys will come in to TNA, guns a-blazin', and are then lost in the shuffle within two months."

—Frank Krewda

THE RECENT INFLUX of top-tier talent to TNA's X division may be the strongest signal in years that the company is playing to its most notable strength—the ability to produce an excellent product in the ring.

For the past few years, TNA has been criticized for shifting its focus away from the X division, which had been a huge source of pride within the company and among its fans. With a nod to its roots, TNA is now on a mission to bring the best available talent to the X division, which is great. But, can too much of a good thing actually be harmful?

TNA is set up for an inevitable logjam of talent, all with their sights set on one goal: X division gold. The fine line between recruiting the perfect depth of talented wrestlers and simply amassing a roster that existing programming cannot accommodate may have been blurred.

Will men like Austin Aries and Low-Ki be given an opportunity to remind fans of why the X division is so special? Or will they become frustrated with the glut of contenders they have to surpass to get to the title?

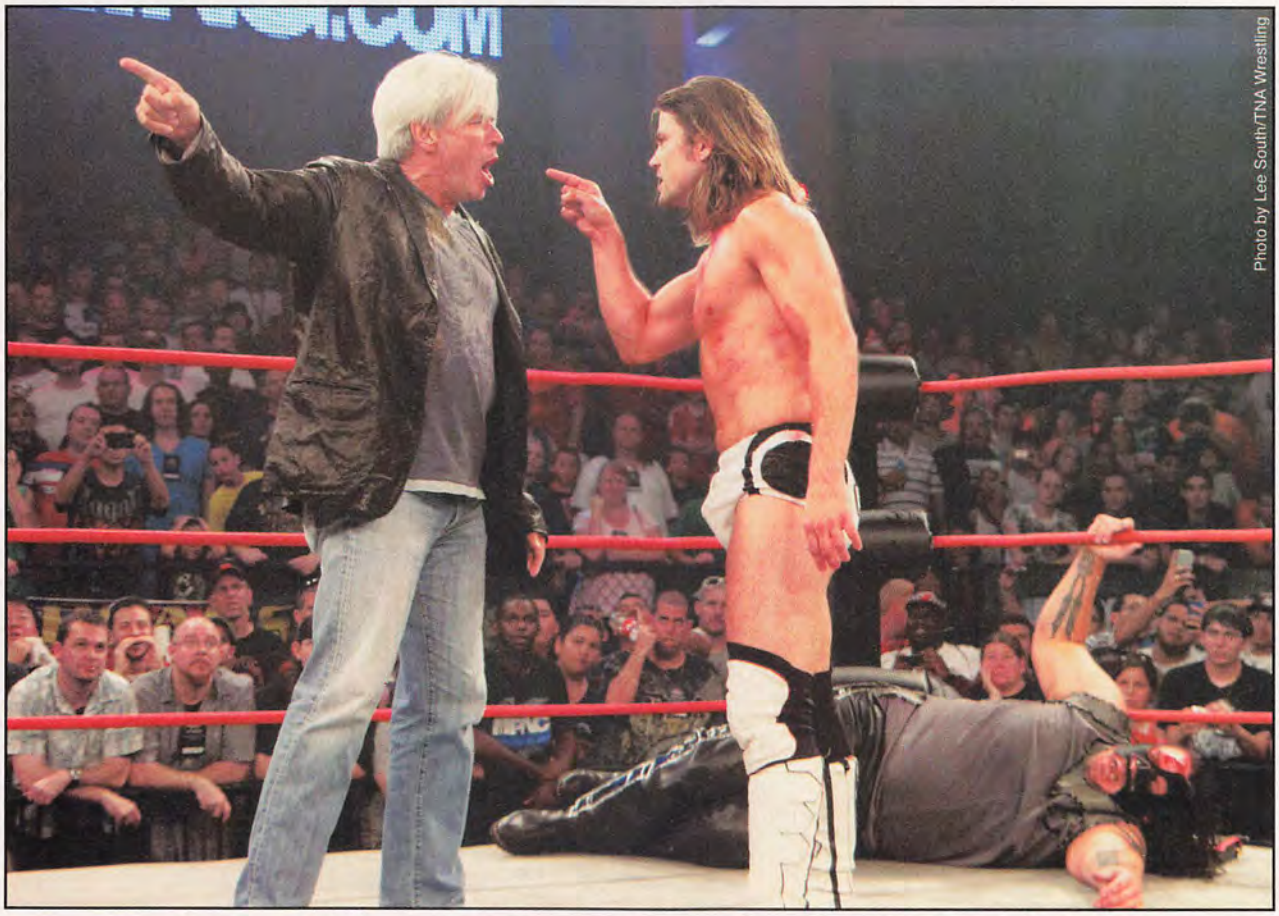


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Brian Kendrick's title victory over Abyss at Destination X will help the X division title re-establish its identity. Now Kendrick has to make sure Eric Bischoff doesn't stall the division's progress.

Photos by George Napolitano

How hard will it be for R-Truth to reclaim his fans when many of them have stuck with him through his current heel turn (above)? Fans used to clamor around Christian as he made his way to the ring (right). Not anymore.

relevant to the man, because he knows the "chance" he's taking isn't really one at all. If this turn fails, Christian is left no worse off than he had been. He knows that with the bat of an eye and turn of a phrase, the jaded fan will once again become enamored.

The same could be said for R-Truth. Expectedly, when asked about his new philosophy, R-Truth's view is more colorful, although not altogether different.

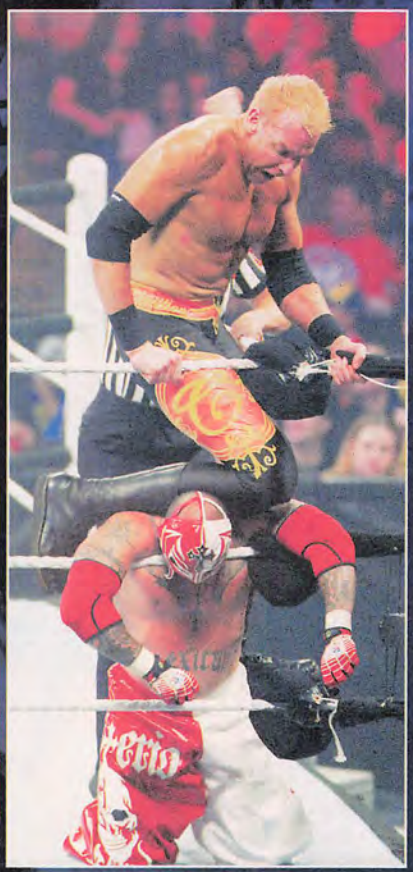
"Love me, hate me, know me. I don't care which it is, so long as I'm WWE champion," Truth pontificates. "Until I see results, I'm sure that the fans are part of the conspiracy to hold me back. But, once I'm champion … maybe I'll 'see the light.'"

A knowing smile of a man with 14 years of experience crosses his face. The fans are fools, aren't they, Mr. Truth? His mouth draws silent, but the smile doesn't leave his face.

The common thread that connects two distinctly uncommon warriors to the liars and thieves of the past grows even stronger. Clearly, both recognize that the typical fan is pliable in their support of any given wrestler. One moment, they can hate someone with the passion of a thousand hells; the next, they're buying his merchandise and blogging about his or her greatness. It's both the beauty and burden of being a fan. Yet, in a world without consequences, where wrestlers are allowed to toy with the very fans they claim (sometimes) to respect, where is the accountability? While all signs point toward men like Christian and R-Truth not deserving the loyalty bestowed upon them, it is those disrespected fans that are willing to welcome them back with open arms.

Perhaps one of the most divisive stars in WWE history and masters of working the fan base to his advantage—Booker T—had an interesting perspective on the mindset behind the calculated turn. "There's only so much time in a man's career where he's legit. The window between legend and 'has-been' closes much quicker than you'd ever think," he offered. "If you think you can reach the top of the mountain and, at the same time, carry the weight of millions of fans on your back, more power to you. Some can and some cannot. I've done it both ways, and let me tell you, it's easier to go it alone. Either way, I knew I was one good deed away from the love again."

In this industry, it's really only until a competitor truly hits rock bottom that he understands and appreciates the limits to which he will go in order to reach his goals. Depending on their loyalties, fans will oftentimes follow their favorite wrestlers to hell and back during their careers, expecting to be duly rewarded when their favorite reaches the pinnacle of the industry. When a wrestler turns against the fan base that supported him through everything, he runs a very calculated risk of potentially alienating someone to the point where they finally cut ties. Still, until fans draw a line with those competitors who attempt to distort their message in order to succeed, the ploys of a Christian or R-Truth will simply be considered another path toward a hollow greatness, no matter how distorted that road may be. □



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Strangling Rey Mysterio Jr. with the ring ropes (left) is not a way to endear yourself to the fans. Christian knows this and doesn't care. His only concern is getting as many chances as it takes to reclaim the World title from Randy Orton (above).

fan favorites desperately in need of a break here or a bounce there to truly ascend to the ranks of superstardom. Save for Christian's abbreviated run as world champion, neither has reached the plateau of greatness in WWE that may have been expected of them. Although both men have put in the time and effort, the results simply haven't matched, placing both in the precarious position many a predecessor has entered. To turn or not to turn?

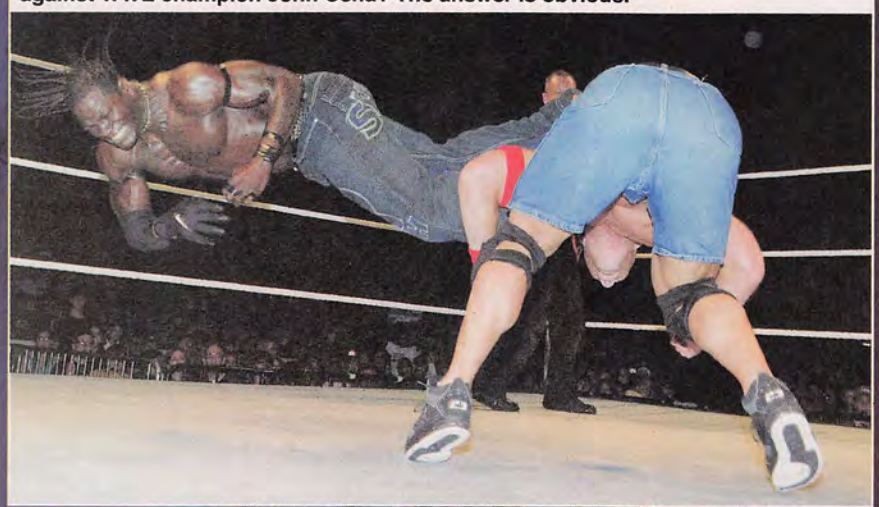
There's no way that Christian—the man who accepted the gauntlet from the beloved Edge in April—would ever betray the fans' trust ... right? Nor would the lovable R-Truth throw away months of the fans' goodwill for a shot at the title ... right? Guess again, lemmings.

"Listen, I've been to the top. I've held world championship gold in my hands. Had it strapped around my waist," said Christian. "My entire career hinges on recapturing that championship, and I will do anything, and go through anyone, to reclaim it—"

Christian came to an abrupt pause before finishing his thought "... whether the fans like how I do it or not. This is just a *chance* I have to take."

Christian's pregnant pause is only overshadowed by the palpable level of sarcasm punctuating his use of the word "chance." Whether the fans agree with Christian's methodologies is ir-

If not for his sudden change in attitude, would R-Truth be in a position to headline against WWE champion John Cena? The answer is obvious.



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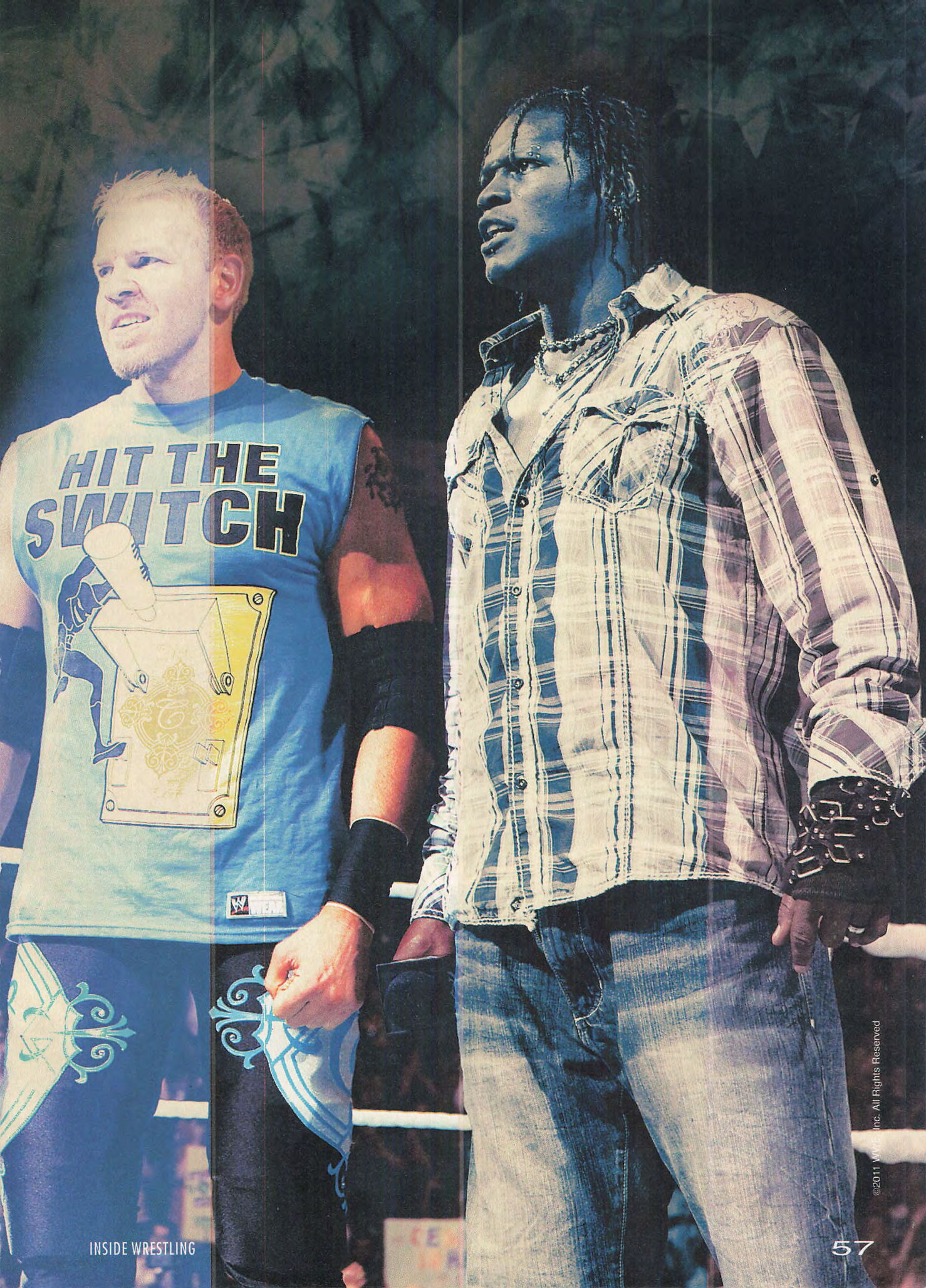

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Playing Us For The Fools We Are

CHRISTIAN & R-TRUTH Know We'll Forgive Them

Some wrestlers play to win at all costs. Others live by a personal code that includes embracing their fan base and encouraging them to share in the highs and lows of their careers. The most dangerous wrestlers are those who actively blur the line between those two paradigms, take what they need now, and beg forgiveness later

By Frank Ingiosi

WHEN A WRESTLER doesn't feel appreciated, his concern over his legacy with the fans is often the first, and easiest, weight to shed. He knows that regardless of his ploys and no matter how many times he bends the rules to advance his career, the fans will always be there waiting to welcome him with open arms once they've seen the "errors of their ways."

It's the oldest trick in a book that has been read cover to cover most recently by WWE stars Christian and R-Truth. Sadly, it's a ploy that we as fans seem to encourage, because, quite bluntly, there is practically no offense a wrestler can commit that we are not willing to pardon.

This is nothing new, mind you. Fan favorites have been turning their backs on loyal followers since the first boots were laced. One would think that after decades of being manipulated in such a manner, fans would finally rebuff such pedestrian attempts by desperate wrestlers settling for the cheap path to stardom. But, sadly, that's not the case.

Wrestlers know that they have the "turn card" up their sleeve for use when the true path toward greatness becomes a bit too tenuous for their liking. Only two entities can possibly prevent a wrestler from going down that nefarious route all too frequently traveled: the wrestler himself and his fans. But time and again our hearts have been broken. And what do we do about it? Nothing! When the time comes, we forgive and forget—and allow the cycle to repeat.

During their most recent WWE tenures, Christian and R-Truth have been largely considered sympathetic

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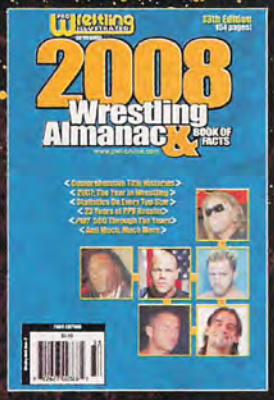

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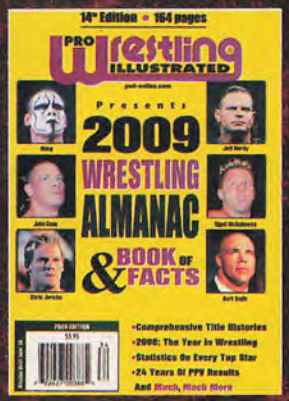

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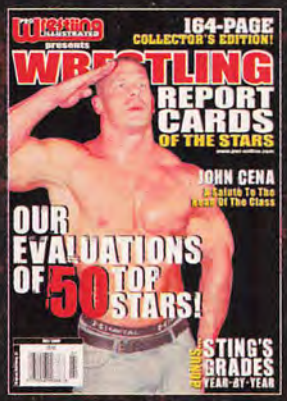

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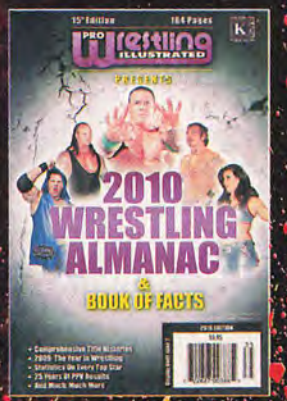

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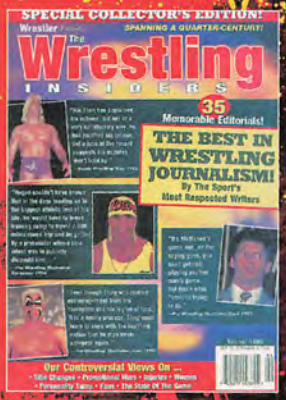

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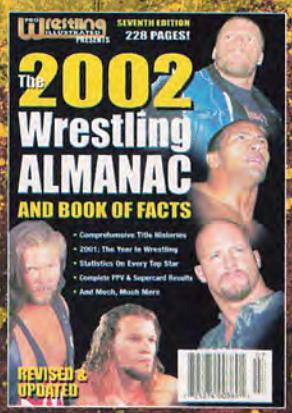

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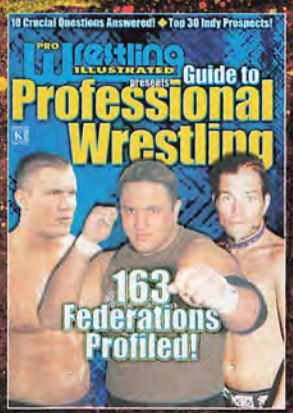

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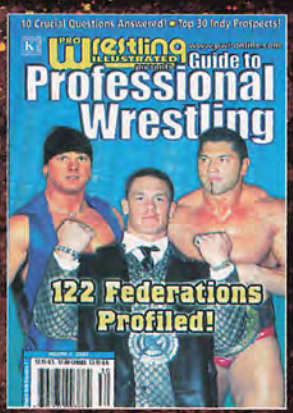

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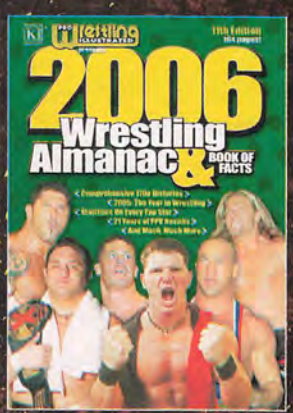

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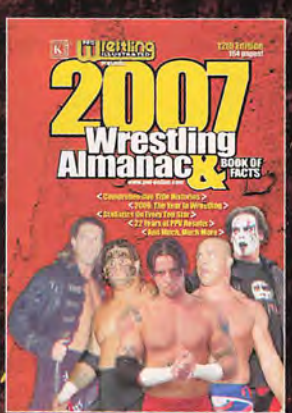

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little bit of time on top. But he can't hold on to the title forever given the company that he keeps. As for me, I'm coming at him fast and hard, so he can't afford to have an entourage dragging him down."

With the keen insight and business sense of a seasoned veteran, Guerrero maintains a close watch on Ziggler's new momentum, objecting to the very notion that her continued assistance may prove counterproductive for Dolph in the long run. "Quite frankly, I resent the very inference that I would do anything to jeopardize Dolph's standing as an up-and-coming, major player in WWE," screeched a resentful Vickie. "I've been around enough champions in my life to recognize talent and ability when I see it, and if he continues to follow my lead, I guarantee Dolph will get all that's coming to him."

Photo by Stu Saks

Photo by George Napolitano

Kofi Kingston has been perhaps Ziggler's most frequent opponent to date in WWE. An I-C title loss to Kingston last year sent Ziggler into a tailspin, but Dolph got revenge on Kingston with a U.S. title victory and subsequent title defenses against him.

Somewhere in the midst of all that self-congratulation, Vickie fails to mention some little-known facts about Dolph's role in his return to prominence. For example, Ziggler studied human anatomy to see where his offense would work most efficiently against opponents; also, Ziggler reformulated his training technique to increase his effectiveness (he's not sharing any details).

Ziggler sought out these game-changing practices because he knew through experience that they'd pull him out of his rut. He didn't do them because noted physiological guru Vickie Guerrero masterminded a regimen that would deliver Dolph to the next level.

After all, whether Ziggler remains in his relationship with Vickie or he moves closer to independence as his career picks up steam, it's readily apparent that he possesses the key components of a fiercely competitive in-ring performer.

The proof is in his recent dominance over Kingston, who needs to prove his own viability as a deserving competitor amidst a burgeoning roster of rivals.

The perspective that comes from trial and error appears to be the greatest influence on Dolph Ziggler these days. "I can't sit around and spin my wheels or wait on Vickie to make decisions for me," he notes. After dropping the Intercontinental championship to Kingston and then earning just an ancillary part in WrestleMania 27, Ziggler brushed up on the most basic elements of his game on his own volition, and left the cheerleading, match-making, and promotional aspects to Guerrero, which is where her big mouth helps him most.

Yes, Vickie is able to help talk Dolph into fortuitous situations, but she can offer Ziggler no in-ring advice or training strategies that will help him win more matches. Vickie doesn't have the technical acumen to show her man how to apply more torque to a hold, or how to better position himself for a counter-maneuver.

Ziggler knows this and now that he's fought back from such a low point without Guerrero's assistance, fans must wonder just how much longer she has left in his future.

"I am an accomplished and experienced amateur and professional wrestler," Ziggler explained. "When my game starts slipping, I know how to start fixing it. Vickie can't help me there, and neither can anybody else." □

Photo by George Napolitano

No doubt Vickie Guerrero has pulled some strings for Dolph Ziggler at times. However, Dolph is not as dependent on her as some think. Most recently, Ziggler pulled out of a slump that Vickie could do nothing about.

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In what was a symbolic low-point for Ziggler, Dolph had lost so much confidence in himself that he followed Vickie's advice to undergo a cosmetic makeover. Luckily, he soon realized his hair color had nothing to do with the funk he was in, and went back to work on his fundamentals. Little by little, Ziggler's confidence and prowess returned.

degree of overall success to his cheerleader-in-chief Vickie Guerrero, though he's somewhat guarded when reflecting upon just how much he owes to her infamously "hands-on" style of management. "It's a great old saying that behind every successful man is a good woman," muses Ziggler. "But the fact of the matter is, I am following my own destiny now. And as great as it is to have someone right behind me cheering me on and inspiring me, at the end of the day, I'm the one who gets in the ring and gets the job done."

Longtime rival Kingston knows all too well that Ziggler, whose star is undoubtedly on the rise, is a formidable opponent. "It would be a big mistake for me to underestimate Dolph Ziggler's abilities," notes Kingston. "I can't say that he's just lucky or that he doesn't deserve a

With Vickie behind him and Edge beneath him, Ziggler thought the World title was his. But neither Smackdown GM Teddy Long nor our family of magazines recognized the reign, especially after Edge took his title back in a rematch.

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By Mike Bessler

THESE DAYS, DOLPH ZIGGLER isn't big on excuses. Although he enjoyed a modicum of success as an Intercontinental champion in 2010, his recent efforts bear the mark of a maturing and evolving competitor who appears willing to learn from his mistakes.

After an embarrassingly brief and bogus stint as World heavyweight champion earlier this year (which this magazine does not recognize), questions abounded regarding Ziggler's viability as a serious heavyweight contender for WWE gold. Indeed, his big moment as king of the proverbial mountain seemed more like a painful hiccup than a career-defining moment. In retrospect, it could very well be that it was a healthy combination of bad advice and missteps that ultimately brought Ziggler into an ensuing stretch of hard luck. But recently, it seems as if the rough road he's traveled has led to newfound confidence and prominence in the ring.

Ziggler's victory over Kofi Kingston at Capitol Punishment earned him the U.S. championship while simultaneously providing him with a much-needed boost to his long-suffering morale. Ziggler looks forward with a combination of cautious optimism and self-adulation. "If I have one flaw at this point," posits Ziggler, "it's that I am so incredibly modest. I mean, sometimes I spend so much time honing my competitive edge and polishing my public image that I forget how much people love and adore me."

To be sure, Ziggler isn't just blowing smoke when he boasts of his expanding fan base. More than 35,000 folks have given Ziggler an enthusiastic "thumbs up" on his official Facebook page while more than 107,000 people now follow the blond battler via Twitter. Longtime Ziggler fan Anna McCoy of Columbus, Ohio, explains her appreciation for the peroxided pugilist with succinct candor: "He's just a natural; it's that simple."

Despite Dolph's satisfaction with his present course, he acknowledges that the previous several months hadn't been all wine and roses. An I-C title loss to Kofi Kingston and a meaningless role at WrestleMania 27 had left Ziggler doubting his skills. Then, an ill-conceived overhaul of his appearance, at Guerrero's insistence, undermined his self-confidence, thus compromising his in-ring presence. Thankfully, it wasn't long before Ziggler reconsidered his extreme makeover. "Everybody asks me about the short, brown hairdo thing," groans Ziggler. "Everybody suffers an occasional misstep or two. Sometimes the little voice inside your head gets drowned out by the louder one that's screaming in your ears."

If that sounds like Dolph is throwing Vickie under the bus, consider that even he admits he owes *some*

NO DOUBTS ABOUT IT

How Dolph Ziggler Survived His Crisis Of Confidence (And Without Vickie's Help)

a moral code. And as Amazing Red can attest, he's very quick to defend the little guy.

One could say that Crimson is on combat patrol in TNA. After all, that's what he did on his two tours of Iraq while on the lookout for insurgents and snipers. There, he encountered truly desperate opponents in truly desperate situations. The Impact Zone is child's play compared to a real war zone.

"If I can handle Iraq, nothing in wrestling will rattle me," stated Crimson matter-of-factly. "You think I'm afraid of Steiner's lead pipe, you think I'm afraid of Janice ... do you think I'm afraid of Bully Ray's big mouth? You think I'm afraid of words?"

Crimson laughed at the thought. "All it takes is for Hogan or Bischoff to just give a guy a look and they freak out," he said. "I've looked real deadly enemies in the eye and survived. Some of these weaker dudes—like Gunner and Matt Hardy—fall prey to Hogan and Bischoff's tactics."

Nevertheless, it's easy to see that Gunner, Hardy, and the rest are even more intimidated by Crimson. But there's more than one reason why Crimson is so feared in the Impact Zone.

"These wrestlers aren't afraid of Crimson's snarl or his hairstyle or his gruff demeanor—they're afraid of his wrestling skills," noted TNA announcer Mike Tenay. "They've seen the very best this company has to offer—wrestlers in their prime and still with bright futures ahead of them—go down in defeat to Crimson. Frankly, I've been amazed at the caliber of the athletes that have lost to him."

Three homegrown stars, in particular, have suffered shocking defeats to the 26-year-old. Abyss lost to Crimson at Sacrifice. Samoa Joe lost to Crimson at Slammiversary. Robert Roode lost to Crimson in the Bound for Glory Series on *Impact Wrestling*.

"Each victory has been more shocking than the previous one," said Tenay. "The fact that Crimson not only beat Joe, but lifted him for that Red Sky Bomb was a sight to behold. I was stunned that he beat Roode, who's as close to technical perfection as anyone in the sport.

"But look at what Crimson did: He stuck to the fundamentals that he knew, using raw power to force Roode into the T-bone suplexes and ultimately into the Red Sky Bomb. As wrestlers become more familiar with his style, Crimson will have to broaden his repertoire, but right now it's working. I'd call it the Goldberg method."

Indeed, critics claimed that Bill Goldberg was over-reliant on clotheslines, the jackhammer, and the spear during his heralded undefeated streak in 1998-99, but it led him to a 173-0 record (at least according to WCW statistics) and a World title victory over Hollywood Hogan at the Georgia Dome—WCW's last great hurrah.

And, on paper, Crimson has even more potential. Goldberg's experience consisted of a failed NFL career, a series of injuries, and a cram session at WCW's Power Plant. Crimson has been honing his skills on Tennessee's independent circuit against veterans such as Chris Michaels in the United States Wrestling Organization and Chase Stevens in Showtime All-Star Wrestling. Combine that experience with his Iraq war background and one has a legitimate wrestling warrior.

"I enjoy scaring the heck out of these bullies and I especially enjoy defeating each guy who is supposed to be this company's next big star," said Crimson. "Abyss, Joe, Roode—they've all gone down. Who will I destroy next? Gunner? How about that turncoat Mr. Anderson? Yeah, I'd like to lift him up into the Red Sky, drop him, and shut that big mouth of his. If he wants to play mind games with me, it ain't gonna work."

Nothing will rattle this courageous war veteran. He's been tried and tested. The Impact Zone will be safe with Crimson on patrol. □

For a young man to take out somebody as experienced as Jeff Jarrett is quite an accomplishment. But that is exactly what Crimson did upon arriving in TNA. Months later, he repeated the feat at TNA's Brooklyn BaseBrawl event.

Photo by George Napolitano

This picture of Crimson standing up to Samoa Joe and slapping his face captures the essence of the Iraqi war veteran. He will not be bullied by the likes of Joe in TNA.

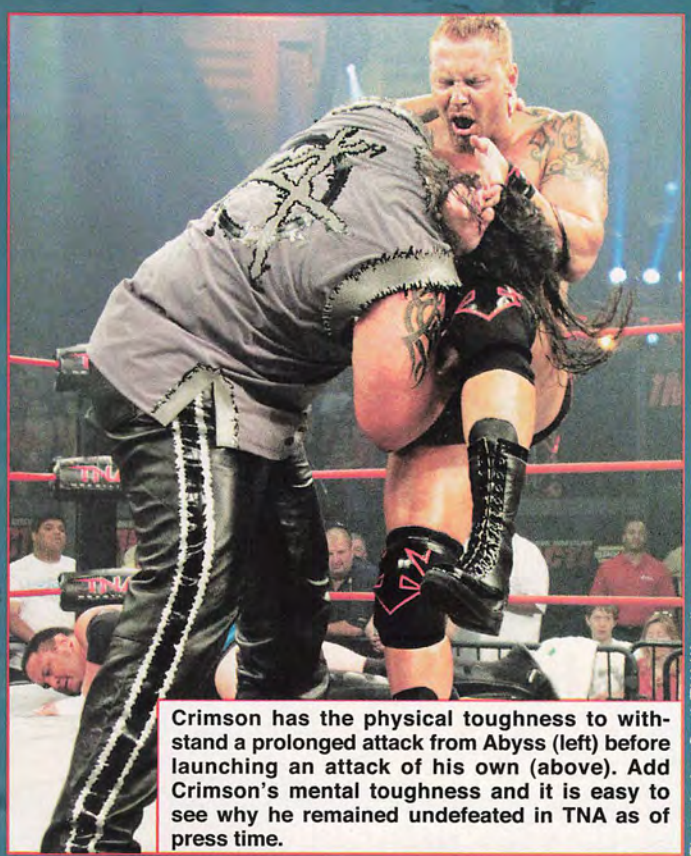
Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

But doesn't Crimson contribute to that stereotype with his one-dimensional promos and all-out offensive in-ring style?

"I guess so, but why shouldn't I?" he asked. "I'm not here for a Harvard debate. I'm here to intimidate and kick butt. If I can scare the hell out of these guys *and* keep them wondering about who I really am, that creates the fear factor. I've got Immortal—these guys who've been in wrestling for over 20 years—afraid for their lives. It's the fear of not knowing. And they're very wise to fear me."

Specifically, Crimson is talking about Scott Steiner, Bully Ray, and Abyss. They saw how Crimson—when he debuted as Little Red, The Amazing Red's "brother"—went after TNA founder Jeff Jarrett last fall. He also resisted Eric Bischoff's efforts to recruit him for Immortal, instead aligning himself with Kurt Angle and Scott Steiner—before Steiner betrayed them to join the heel faction.

Yet there's something more to Crimson than brute force. He has



Crimson has the physical toughness to withstand a prolonged attack from Abyss (left) before launching an attack of his own (above). Add Crimson's mental toughness and it is easy to see why he remained undefeated in TNA as of press time.

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

CRIMSON

"IF I CAN HANDLE IRAQ, NOTHING IN WRESTLING WILL RATTLE ME!"

SCOTT STEINER, BULLY RAY, ABYSS, SAMOA JOE, AND OTHERS HAVE TRIED TO INTIMIDATE CRIMSON. IT HASN'T WORKED. THEY DIDN'T REALIZE THAT HE'S ALREADY BEEN THROUGH HELL AND BACK

By Harry Burkett

TOMMY MERCER SERVED two tours of duty in Iraq and was a member of the prestigious 101st Airborne. Forged in the fire of a foreign land and tempered by the steel and grit of the U.S. Army, Mercer was transformed into the fearless powerhouse he is today.

The wrestlers of TNA—and even the fans—underestimated the 6'6", 252-pounder. They figured that Crimson was created in the same factory as Barbarian, Warlord, Luther Reigns, Mason Ryan, Rob Terry, and countless other behemoths with billion-dollar bodies and average wrestling skills—"Houses with no furniture," as Jesse Ventura used to call them.

Yet Crimson was not assembled on the wrestling prototype line, nor was he conceived in a sports entertainment Petri dish. He was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, where he excelled in football and basketball while in high school. He joined the U.S. Army after graduation so he could pursue a college education. That's how he came to serve in the Iraq war.

"Yeah, there's more to me than the spiked hair and tattoos," mused Crimson. "I swear, people act stunned when I use enough syllables to form a word or string together a sentence. But, if we were sitting next to each other in college class, they'd be the ones copying off my paper."

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Photo by Scott Finkelstein

a three-day tournament to crown the first-ever IWGP Intercontinental champion. MVP fully understood the potential irony of the situation, and simply wasn't going to waste this golden opportunity.

He ran through Kazuchika Okada and Tetsuya Naito in the first two rounds, setting up a showdown with Toru Yano in the finals at the Asylum Arena in South Philadelphia.

Yano, who cheated his way to previous wins over Dan Maff and Yujiro Takahashi, quickly found that he could not pull his underhanded tactics on the determined Porter. Just shy of the 10-minute mark, MVP trapped his opponent in the TTB and scored the victory.

Afterward, he stood in the ring with his newly won championship belt and thanked the crowd, which cheered him throughout.

"I gotta admit, that was an emotional moment," said Maff. "I was pulling for MVP all the way. The guy came from a tough background and had to overcome a lot. But he did it. And then he made it in WWE, left on his own terms, and is now one of the top stars in Japan."

Photos by Scott Finkelstein

MVP sends his final-round opponent Toru Yano to the mat with a stiff shoulder-block (top) before clamping on the submission maneuver that would earn him the win and the IWGP Intercontinental championship (above).

The significance of Porter's IWGP I-C title win was not lost on his former contemporaries, either.

"I'm very proud of him and what he's been able to accomplish since leaving WWE," said Mysterio. "He took the initiative. He followed his heart and went after his dream. How can you not feel happy for someone who takes that chance and succeeds?"

Following his first successful defense of the IWGP I-C title, a return bout against Yano at NJPW's Dominion 6.18 event, Porter found himself surrounded by a mob of reporters in the locker-room. After politely answering questions for 15 minutes, most of them through an interpreter, he headed for the showers. But not before offering one final thought.

"Hey guys, what can I say? I'm like Frank Sinatra—I did it my way!" he exclaimed with a broad smile and a wink for the mostly confused contingent of Japanese media.

Indeed, in an era where WWE always decides who gets "future endeavored," MVP most certainly did it his way. □

was always very vocal about my desire to wrestle in Japan.

"The thing is, I was about to make the biggest decision of my career, and it was really weighing on me. I had some doubts as to whether I should go through with it."

But go through with it he did. To the shock of just about everyone in the industry, Porter asked for—and was granted—a release from his WWE contract on December 2. The news sent the Internet into a frenzy, with many speculating that he would soon land in TNA or perhaps Ring of Honor.

As so many modern-day athletes do, Porter quickly took to Twitter to address the move. After assuring his fans that he was not fired, he stated: "I felt it was time to go international & freshen things up."

Photo by George Napolitano

In WWE, MVP was a two-time U.S. champion and enjoyed modest mainstream exposure, rubbing elbows with *The View's* Sherri Shepherd, who accompanied him to the ring for several matches. Since leaving WWE to establish his career in Japan, MVP hasn't looked back.

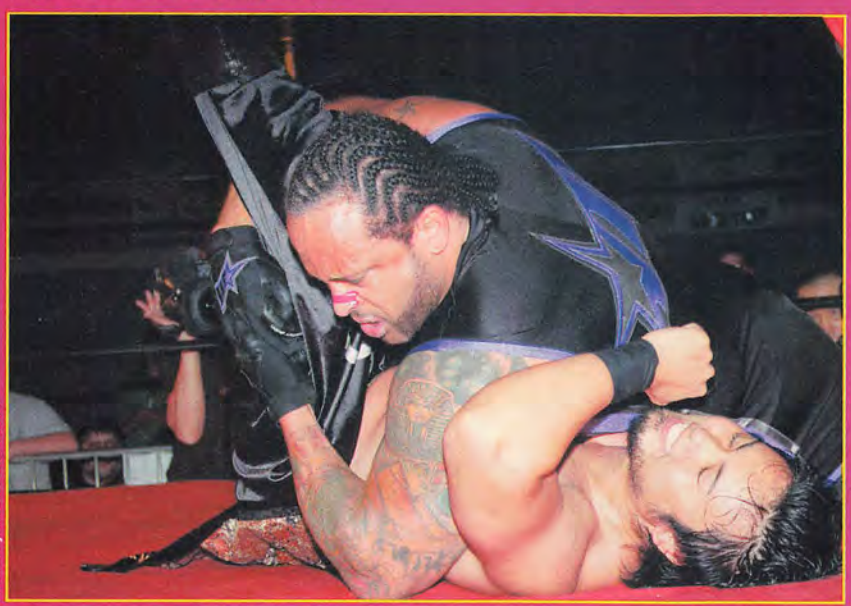


Photo by Scott Finkelstein

MVP covers Kazuchika Okada for the pin in the first round of New Japan's Intercontinental championship tournament. This victory was just one of the first steps in a career move that MVP describes as a "dream come true."

In past interviews, Porter had noted his passion for puroresu and a desire to one day wrestle in Japan. Early in his WWE career, he incorporated several of Masahiro Chono's trademark maneuvers into his repertoire, including a particularly effective version of his Kenka Kick. There was little doubt that Porter would eventually be heading to the Far East. He made his debut for New Japan Pro Wrestling on February 20, teaming with Taichi to defeat Togi Makabe and Tomoaki Honma by making Honma submit to his "Take It To The Bank" crucifix neck crank.

Afterward, Porter called the experience a "dream come true." Those who witnessed this and subsequent matches used adjectives such as "renewed" and "refocused" to describe MVP's performances and overall demeanor.

Content at last and back at the top of his game, it didn't take the Florida native long to make his mark in NJPW. In early-March, he entered the 2011 New Japan Cup tournament, used to determine a new number-one contender to IWGP heavyweight champion Hiroshi Tanahashi.

He soundly defeated Karl Anderson in the opening round, but suffered his first loss in New Japan to Makabe in the quarterfinals. The following day, however, Porter forced Tanahashi to submit in a tag team match.

With a victory over the man regarded as the top singles champion in Japan on his resume, MVP then embarked on what he described as a "surreal journey"—NJPW's first tour of the United States in May, which included stops in New Jersey, New York City, and Philadelphia.

Naturally, heavy focus was placed on Porter's involvement in the venture, which included

Photo by Scott Finkelstein

MVP'S SUCCESS STORY

The Man Who Wished WWE The Best In Their Future Endeavors

Despite having won two U.S. titles, MVP felt unfulfilled in WWE. So he boldly gave up a spot in wrestling's biggest company to pursue a career in Japan. Would this gamble pay off?

By Al Alven

SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT with Montel Vontavious Porter. It was evident in his body language and in his eyes. The fire, the energy, the competitive spirit that were well noted throughout his tenure with WWE just weren't there.

"He looked tired, really worn down," recalls Rey Mysterio Jr., who captained a team that included Porter, The Big Show, Kofi Kingston, and Chris Masters at last November's Survivor Series pay-per-view. "I remember talking to him right before we went through the curtain. He said he was okay, but he wasn't his usual, upbeat self that day. He just seemed deflated."

Not even four minutes into the match, a clearly uninspired Porter was eliminated by Drew McIntyre. Quietly, he slid out of the ring and disappeared.

At the time, no one realized the personal turmoil Porter was going through.

"I had made up my mind by that point, really," MVP explained. "I had given a lot to WWE, and, make no mistake, that was a two-way street. But I felt like I was spinning my wheels over the past few years. I needed to seek out new challenges. And I

2 MAGAZINES IN 1!

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"Our target audience is 18-34 ... If you're 18 years old, you don't want to see PG stuff. You don't want to see somebody called a 'darn butthole.' It insults their intelligence."

things that wrestling companies are doing, they're doing to kill the business, and sometimes I question whether that's intentional.

Q: I take it you're not a fan of the WWE dropping the term "wrestling."

A: Words have meaning, and meaning is up to the user. They have these buzz words over there. You're not allowed to say "belt." You're not allowed to say "strap." If I say "belt," and you know what it means, then who cares? If it's not wrestling, then it's a scripted television show. Then why aren't the performers in AFTRA or SAG?

Q: Do you think the future of wrestling as a whole is dependent on the success of WWE?

A: I don't think so. I think if they cease to exist, there are wrestling fans out there that would run to an alternative source. Sometimes I think that we need to get our name out there more. The WWE has this machine, and that machine has become so big that it's larger than any of its characters. You can plug any character into that machine and it will go. You can announce tickets are on sale to WrestleMania 30 tomorrow, and a good chunk of those tickets will get sold. You don't have to announce one person on that card. It's a machine. And that's a little scary.

Q: Do you think TNA is on the right track to ultimately give WWE a run for its money?

A: I think what we do is we offer something a little different. And I think we could be even a little more different. I really liked the *Reaction* stuff, and I'm glad they've kept that part of what we do, and I wish they'd take it even another step further. One of my criticisms has always been that I hate the fact that everything that happens in the two hours that we broadcast happens in the same building. Why can't it happen on the road or in the car or in the hotel room?

Q: But doesn't that move farther away from the creed of "wrestling matters"?

A: Yes, wrestling does matter. But you have to have a reason for people to watch the wrestling. You have to have characters that are compelling and make people say, "I want to watch that guy get his ass kicked." □

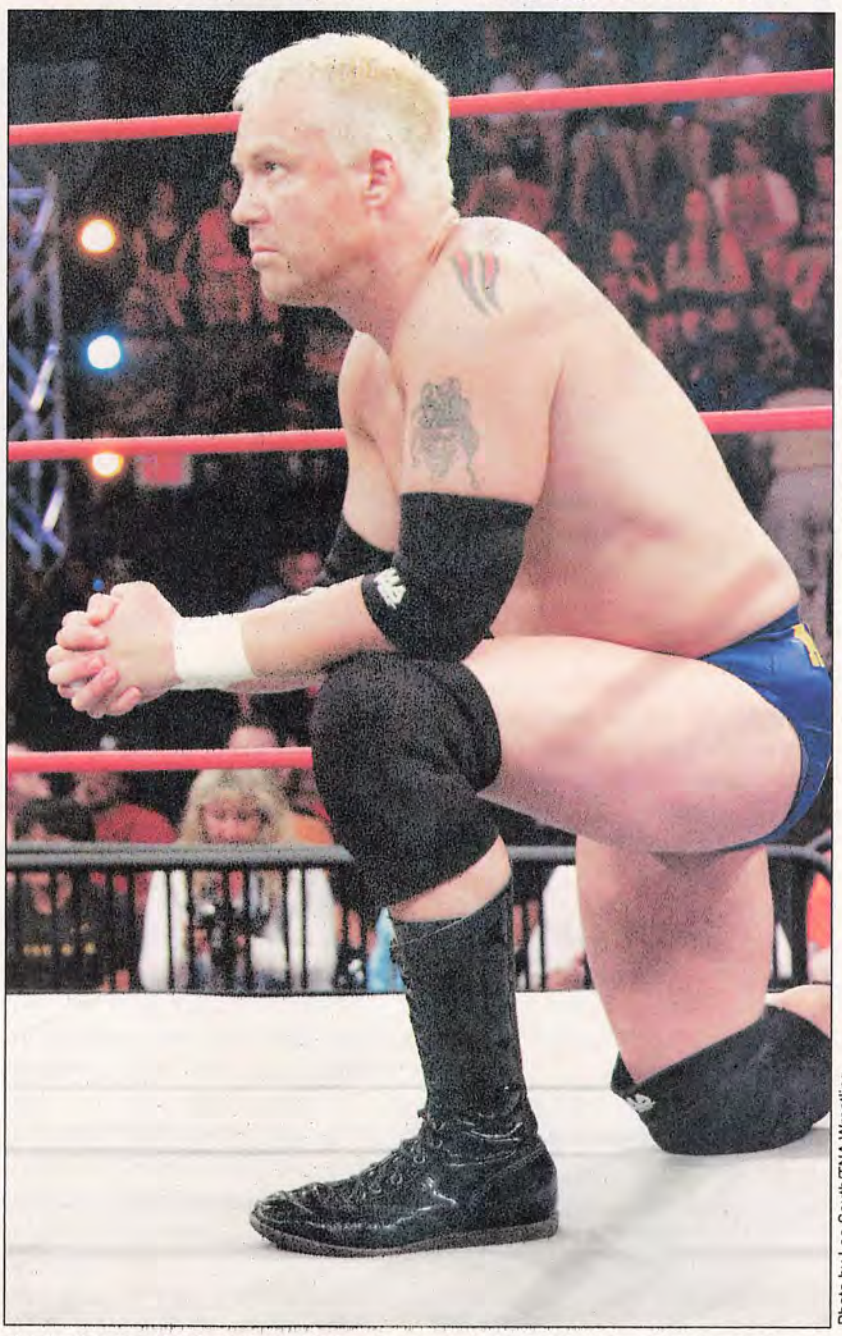
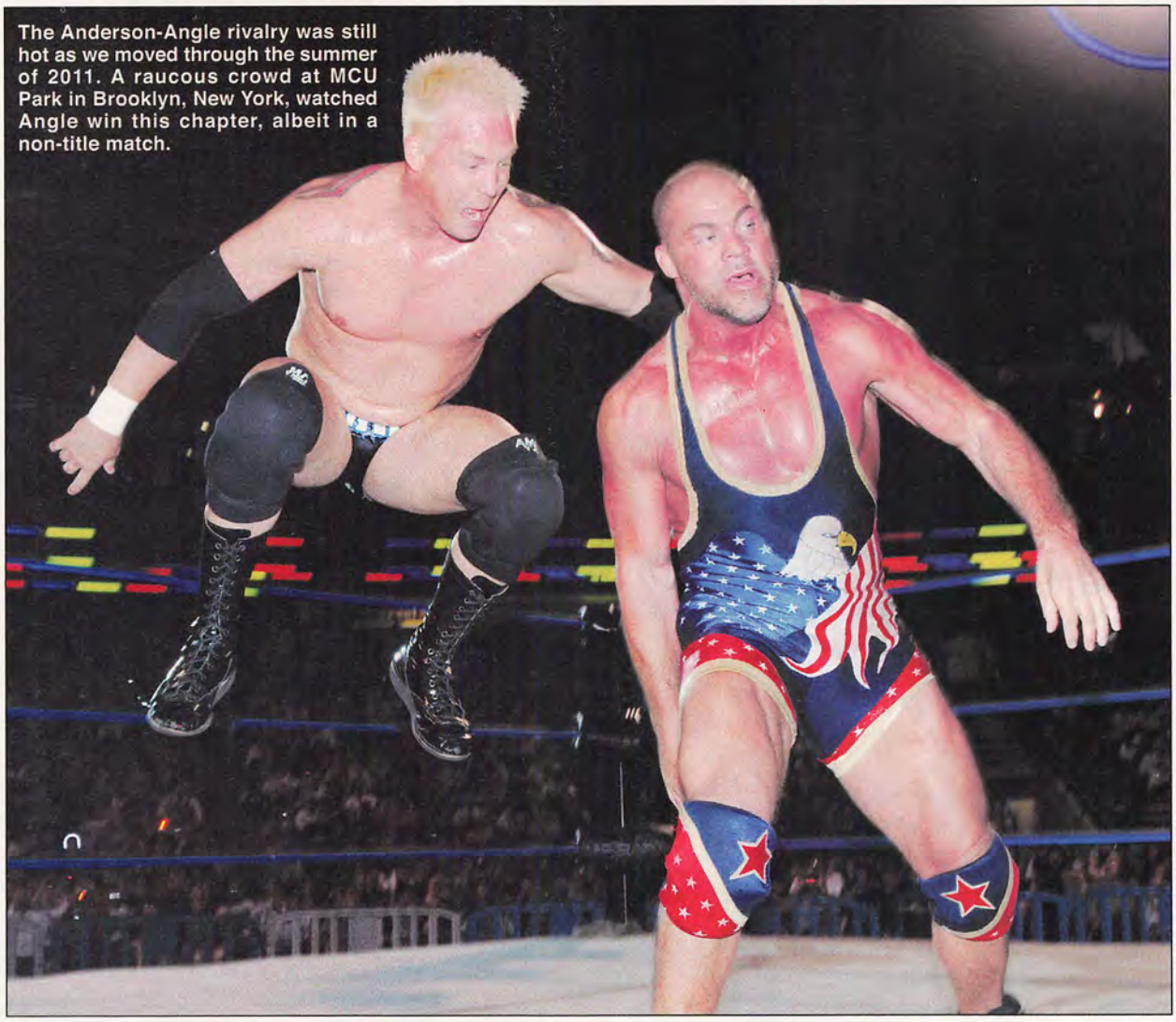


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

As Anderson thinks of his future, he sees beyond the years he has left as a wrestler. Ken's already had a taste of screen acting and feels his experience in the wrestling business will lead to bigger and better parts.



The Anderson-Angle rivalry was still hot as we moved through the summer of 2011. A raucous crowd at MCU Park in Brooklyn, New York, watched Angle win this chapter, albeit in a non-title match.

Photo by George Napolitano

technology, we do have the ability to know what people are watching when they're flipping through the channels. The reason I say this is that when I first came to TNA, people would say to me, "Hey, you're Mr. Kennedy." And more and more I'm finding that people say to me now, "Hey, you're Mr. Anderson." It happens with more frequency.

Q: As somebody who grew up watching wrestling as a kid, what's it like for you to be working with legends like Hulk Hogan and Sting? Does the fan in you still come out?

A: Absolutely. One of my most hated words in this business is the term "mark," because in my opinion, we're all marks. I'm such a big mark that I wanted to shave my body, slather baby oil all over myself, wear tights, and pretend to fight another human being. So when I do get to work with those people, it is exciting. I wouldn't say the luster's worn off, but I don't get the butterflies like I did before. I remember standing in the ring one night at a house show in Oklahoma City. I was wrestling The Undertaker for the first time, and I remember standing in the ring in the dark and hearing the gong. I got goose bumps from head to toe. And I stood there and said, "How the hell did I get here?" I still get that when I'm working with these guys, but it's little more professional.

Q: Long after you leave this world, what do you hope your legacy in this sport will be?

A: *(Long pause)* That's a tough one. I've never really thought about what people are going to think of me when I'm dead and gone. I care more about what people think right now, and it has to be more than just, "I hate you. I want you to die." I think we covered that. I don't know. I think the wrestling business has evolved a little bit. And I think it needs to evolve again. And I guess I can have a hand in doing that, I would love to bring it back to the mainstream again. I do believe that we do have a good thing going, but it does scare me that some of the

"Feel free to give me criticism, as long as you back it up and give me an alternative. Don't just say, 'You suck.' Say, 'You suck, and here's how I think you can improve.'"

While holding a championship belt may not be as prestigious as in days past, Anderson was flattered that TNA chose him (albeit briefly) to be a representative of the company. Now he wants to help find a way to bring the sport back to the mainstream.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

to decide. It's just that in our society, you either have to be one thing or the other. You either believe that global warming exists or you believe it's a sham.

Q: In addition to Kurt Angle and Jeff Hardy, you've also worked with Rob Van Dam and Sting, and other guys who made their names outside of TNA. What do you think about TNA featuring so many former stars from WWE and WCW? Do you think it's important to have familiar faces out there, or do you think TNA should be doing more to feature some of its excellent homegrown talent?

A: I think that we've got a pretty good blend of talent. We've got AJ Styles, The Motor City Machine Guns, Samoa Joe. These guys were never WWE guys. There's other talent who are getting pushed right now, like Gunner. He's getting a big push and he's never been in WWE. On the other hand, I think that you do need talent that's been on the big stage.

Q: You've worked on the biggest stage of all, WrestleMania. After getting so much notoriety in WWE, how much different is it working for a smaller company?

A: To me it's challenging and I want to be a part of taking the company to the next level, and doing what I can to help, as a cog in the wheel, to take the company to the next level and make it a little larger. I think the ratings system is pretty outdated. I've actually looked into it, and there are, I believe, 25,000 Nielsen boxes out there, which works out to be like .008 percent of the total homes in the United States. To me, that is not a very accurate measure at all of what people are watching. I do think that, with modern

A: I think back in the day, titles meant a lot more than they do now. It used to be that guys would hold titles for a year or more. And guys would be chasing them and it would take a long time and a lot of effort in order for it to change hands. But winning that title was very important for me. It shows that obviously the company believes in you as their spokesman for a while. At the same time, there have been some questionable titleholders in the past. But as long as people say "yay" when they're supposed to say "yay" and "boo" when they're supposed to "boo," I'm happy.

Q: Well, sometimes that might not be that obvious to fans, considering how often wrestlers go back and forth from babyface to heel in TNA. Just since you arrived in the company last year, you've gone back and forth a few times from fan favorite to rulebreaker. Do you have a problem with that?

A: Here's where sometimes people don't understand the full story. There are reasons why somebody will suddenly change from heel to babyface, from a logistics concern. Maybe somebody is hurt and maybe somebody needs to fill a spot that was originally intended for somebody else. And we can't think of somebody else to fill that role, so we need you to fill that role. Part of me thinks that wrestling needs to evolve again. There's this thought that, in wrestling, it needs to be black or white. You're either a good guy or a bad guy. I don't know anybody in my life that is wholly evil or wholly good. With *Breaking Bad*, or *Sons Of Anarchy*, or *Weeds*—you look at these shows and there's a guy who is a chemistry teacher who sells meth. Is this a good guy? By society's standards, no. But we look at the TV show and we can sympathize with him. So I don't know what the answer is. But I do believe that sometimes in the wrestling business, it's almost forced. And it can be insulting to the wrestling audience, whereas on a TV show like *Sons Of Anarchy*, you decide. But in wrestling, it's "Hey, I'm the bad guy. Boo me," or "I'm the good guy. Cheer for me."

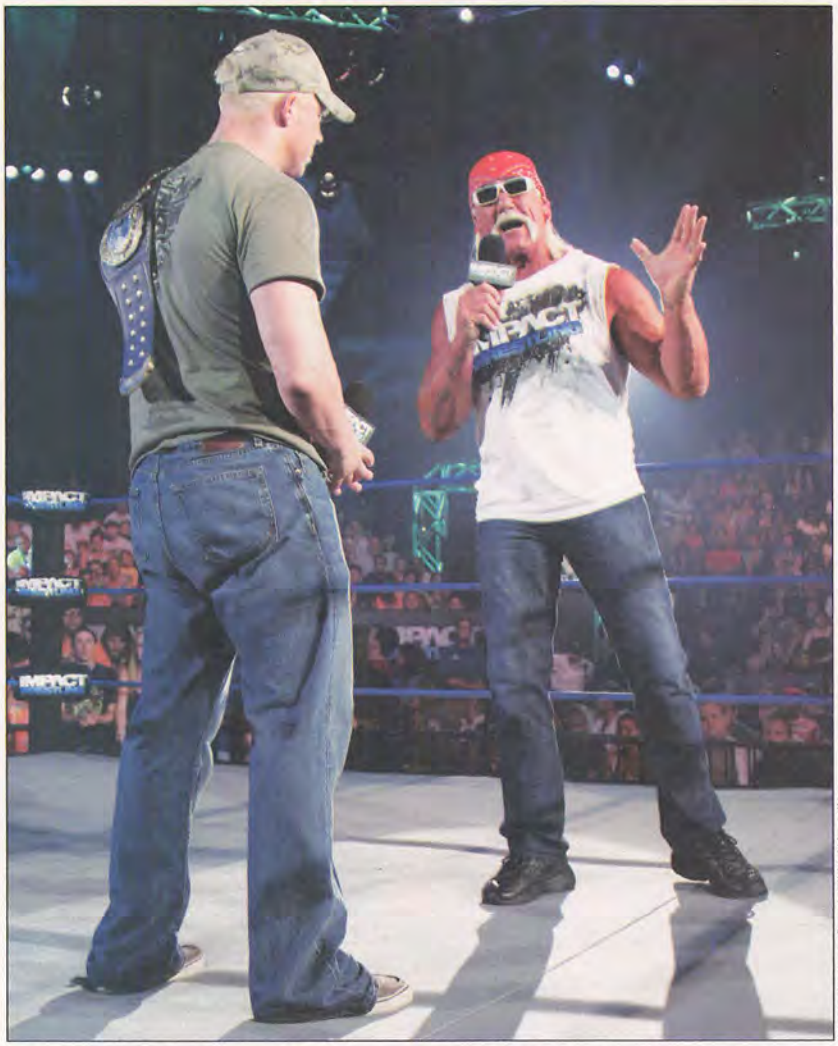


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Anderson has become pretty adept at sidestepping political land mines, and there isn't a bigger one south of the Mason-Dixon line than Hulk Hogan. If Anderson is going to keep that TNA belt, he's going to have to use all of his experience, in and out of the ring, to do so.

Q: Yes, but the paradigm of good vs. evil has been a staple of storytelling since biblical times. Don't you think you can get too far away from it?

A: You can get too far away from it, but I don't think it has to be completely one or the other. I don't think there needs to be some sort of definition. When I was a babyface, I would wrestle Jeff Hardy a lot. And it was very hard because Jeff Hardy is a legend. I would say, arguably, that The Hardy Boys are one of the legends of that generation. And to go in front of him as a babyface, a lot of times it was walking that 90-degree incline. It was very hard, because sometimes the fans would be sitting on their hands not knowing what to do. It was tough for us because it's like, "What are we doing wrong?" It's such a fine line. There is no right answer and there is no wrong answer. It's up to everybody

"I think Kurt and I just cared so much about it. I really felt strongly at that point that I had something to prove. And I still do to some degree, or else I would be out of the business."

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

When it came time to do battle at Slammiversary 2011, none of Anderson's prematch hijinks were a factor. He simply outwrestled Sting (top) to capture his second TNA World title (above).

A: I don't know how it's possible to have a show about guys that want to fight each other, with half-naked women running around and all of the other stuff that we have, and have it be PG. I just don't understand how that works. It doesn't make sense to me. My favorite years in the wrestling business were the Attitude Era. Maybe it's as simple as they've decided, "We need it to get away from this for a while, as far away as possible, so that when we bring it back it will be a what's-old-is-new kind of thing." But I look at television shows, and I'm not really super-hip on pop culture. But I do watch modern shows, and all the modern shows that I watch that are very popular are very edgy. *Family Guy* is very, very edgy. They're not afraid to go anywhere. And they're one of the most watched shows in America. Our target audience is 18-34. And you're giving them PG content ... If you're 18 years old, you don't want to see PG stuff. You don't want to see somebody called a "darn butthole." It insults their intelligence. I do think it can be overdone. A lot of people liked the movie *Bad Santa*. Personally, I didn't like it because I think they used the F-word just for the sake of using it.

Q: What's your take on the importance of blood in wrestling?

A: I think it depends on the scenario. If you're inside a steel cage and you're beating each other's faces into the cage, to not have blood leaves a question mark hanging over my head. But I'm not a billionaire, so what do I know? For my personal tastes, I think it serves a purpose every now and again. I don't think it needs to be in every match. I don't think it needs to be more than one time in a night. I don't think it has to be even one time in a night. But if you're having the rubber match and you're beating the ever-loving snot out of each other, at least one person should have blood on his face. Everybody's always thinking what would happen in a real scenario. Well, if you punch somebody in the face, then there's a good chance there's going to be blood on his face.

Q: I'm sure as somebody who grew up watching WWE and then went on to become a wrestler, it had to be a dream of yours to one day win a world title. You finally did win one this year, but it was the TNA World title. Obviously, as a kid, you didn't dream of winning the TNA World title, because TNA didn't exist. So when it finally happened, did it feel like a dream come true?

There is one legendary star on the TNA roster who never wrestled for WWE. His name is Sting—and this is not him. Mr. Anderson does look pretty convincing in this getup.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

just that a lot of the time I think they don't understand the full story behind what happens on TV. A lot of times they look at that one episode and they'll say, "Oh my God, that doesn't make sense." And, yeah, maybe it doesn't make sense. But if you continue to watch the episodic nature of our program, it will make sense eventually. Sometimes plans are scrapped because of injuries.

My take on criticism is that if it's constructive criticism, I will take it gladly, any day of the week. But if it's just, "You suck," then I'm sorry if you feel that way, but screw you. I need more intellectualism than that. Feel free to give me criticism, as long as you back it up and give me an alternative. Don't just say, "You suck." Say, "You suck, and here's how I think you can improve." And I might say, "Hey, you're right." I'm never above learning. I'm never above changing things. And that goes for changing just about every aspect of my life.

Q: Last year, you did change things up quite a bit. Your character became a bit edgier. You started wearing the cap and calling yourself an "Asshole." And your popularity really took off. Can you tell me a bit about what was behind the transformation?

A: I just wanted to do the stuff that I wanted to do, and I wanted to do it for a long time. When I was in OVW with Paul Heyman, which was some of the most fun I ever had in the wrestling business, he was just letting me be myself and as out there as I wanted to be. It was a roller-coaster ride of emotions. A lot of wrestlers are just good at playing mean and angry. I try to play a whole mix of different emotions. It wasn't so much a change as it was this was stuff that I had pitched years ago to Vince McMahon and he said absolutely not. The very first meeting I had with him, I pitched the "asshole" idea. I would bring up how Steve Austin was always telling people, "There are about 10,000 people here calling you an asshole," and that was a bad thing. But what if we turned it around? What if we played into the notion that nice guys finish last, and so I'm an asshole. I think it was Colin Powell who said, "It's sometimes better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission." It was one of those things that I knew in my head at the time would work. But now that I asked Vince and he told me no, I can't say it for sure. Even if I did say it and it worked, I'd still get into trouble. Whereas if I just went out there and said it and it worked, I could have apologized later and said I just felt it at the moment.

Q: You certainly couldn't say it today in WWE. What's your take on the opposing philosophies between TNA and WWE when it comes to adult content?

"I was a completely different person before I went into the military. It was one of the best things I ever did. My parents didn't want me to do it ... It was the same with wrestling."

retirees. And my grandfather told me that, one night, he took out the television, and he said, "I'll be damned if I don't turn on the TV and you're biting on a medal that was given to Kurt Angle by a veteran." These are all World War II veterans down there. And my grandpa was really mad at me. I don't think he's really grasped that concept. You know, they made a movie about 9/11—*United 93*. And they had to cast guys to play terrorists. But that doesn't mean they were really terrorists. We were telling a story of good and evil, and not caring about the men and women who were overseas fighting for somebody else's freedom. I looked at it as this is the role that's needed to be played. There are bad guys in movies that are not bad guys in real life.

Q: Do you think the fact that the storyline got over as well as it did was vindication for you that you made the right decision?

A: I think so. I'm a patriot, and a diehard patriot. My cousin happens to be an Army Ranger, and I called him and told him, "I just want to let you know here is what we're doing." I just laid it out for him. And he said, "I know what the deal is. Don't worry about it. I know you're a patriot."

Q: These days, wrestling companies are criticized a lot for doing so much so often that it can be tough for any single thing to really stick out as memorable. And yet, that feud with Kurt Angle, culminating in the cage match at last year's Lockdown, is still talked about today. What do you think it was about that feud and that match that resonated so well with fans?

A: I think Kurt and I just cared so much about it. I really felt strongly at that point that I had something to prove. And I still do to some degree, or else I would be out of the business. And I think Kurt's the same way, which is why Kurt will go out on a house show in front of a couple hundred people sometimes and have the kind of match that maybe he shouldn't be having. He doesn't have a shut-off valve. And I'm kind of the same way. I think it was the right mix of action and soap opera that we needed. I watched that match over and over. It happens to be my very favorite match of my career. And I still look at that match and think, *Ah, I wish I had done that differently.* Wrestlers come up to me all the time and say, "Hey, what did you think of my match?" And I'll say, "Well, this part looked terrible and this thing didn't make any sense." And they'll say, "Well, did you see how this spot looked?" And at that point it's clear that they don't really want a critique from me.

Q: How do you deal with criticism?

A: For the past year now, my Twitter and my Facebook, which I rarely even look at, are about the only connections that I have with the Internet wrestling community. I don't look at any websites, even if somebody tells me about something. Like, somebody told me about somebody (CM Punk) shooting during an interview on the Monday night program. For such a long time I just looked around and so many guys care so much and they cater to those fans. And it's not that I don't care. It's

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

TNA has, in Anderson's eyes, a good blend of veteran talent and up-and-coming young stars like Gunner, known in the indies as Phill Shatter. He feels it's important to have some wrestlers who made their bones in WWE, as did he.

Photo by George Napolitano

There is a place for blood in wrestling, Anderson feels, if it enhances the realism of the event. The sight of blood becomes ineffective if overused, he adds.

A: My dad, he was actually my stepfather. I never really knew my biological father. And from the time he came into my life when I was about five years old until the time I was about 18 or 19, I absolutely feared and hated him. He was a ticking time bomb. But when I got older and went into the military, I was thankful that he was the way he was. He helped mold me into the person that I am today—take it or leave it. I had already known that he had lung cancer when I signed with OVW. And that was a conversation with my parents. I told them, "I have to go away, what do you want me to do?" This was a time when I was driving from Green Bay to Nashville, making $49 and eating Ramen noodles and making all kinds of sacrifices. And they both looked at me and said, "There is absolutely nothing you can do. We need you to go down to Louisville and do your thing. And when you can come back, you'll come back." Luckily, I was able to come off the road after about six months of being in OVW. And I was just so happy to be able to tell my dad that I was going to be debuting on *Velocity*. They came to a show, and I remember Ric Flair was coming to the ring and he took the time to come over to my dad, who was in a wheelchair at the time and a shell of his former self. He stopped and had a few words with him and then kept going. And it meant a lot to me. The bottom line is that my dad was able to see me fulfill my dream of playing on the big stage. But it was tough. It was really tough. A lot of people don't know this, but I never really got any time off after my dad passed away. The day after the funeral, we headed out on a 12-day European tour.

Q: On the subject of your military career, did you learn lessons in the Army that later helped you in your wrestling career? I'd think it must have taught you the importance of discipline.

A: I was a completely different person before I went into the military. It was one of the best things I ever did. My parents didn't want me to do it. They were begging me, "Please don't do this." And after I came back from boot camp, and they saw how I handled myself, they said, "That's the best thing you've ever done." It was the same with wrestling. It was, "What the hell are you doing?" And after my first match, they'd say, "You found your calling."

My mother followed me around for two or three years in my independent career, coming to shows in the area. She used to tell me, "You've found your calling. You really like this. But, Ken, whatever you do, please promise me I'll never see you going through tables or cutting yourself or anything like that." And I said, "Nah, nah, Mom, I wouldn't do that." And I remember I was wrestling a steel cage match a few weeks later, and this guy was beating my head, slamming it into the cage repeatedly, and I was bleeding. And I remember looking out into the audience and seeing my mom burning a hole into my soul.

Q: While we're on the topic of the military and bloody matches, let me ask you about your feud last year with Kurt Angle. As part of the storyline, your character took a very controversial anti-military stance. Was that tough for you to do, considering your background?

A: No, and I'll tell you why. Art imitates life. And what I do is art. I had to explain this to my grandparents. They're huge fans, and every summer they take their RV down to the Gulf Shore and they have this big party there with all the other

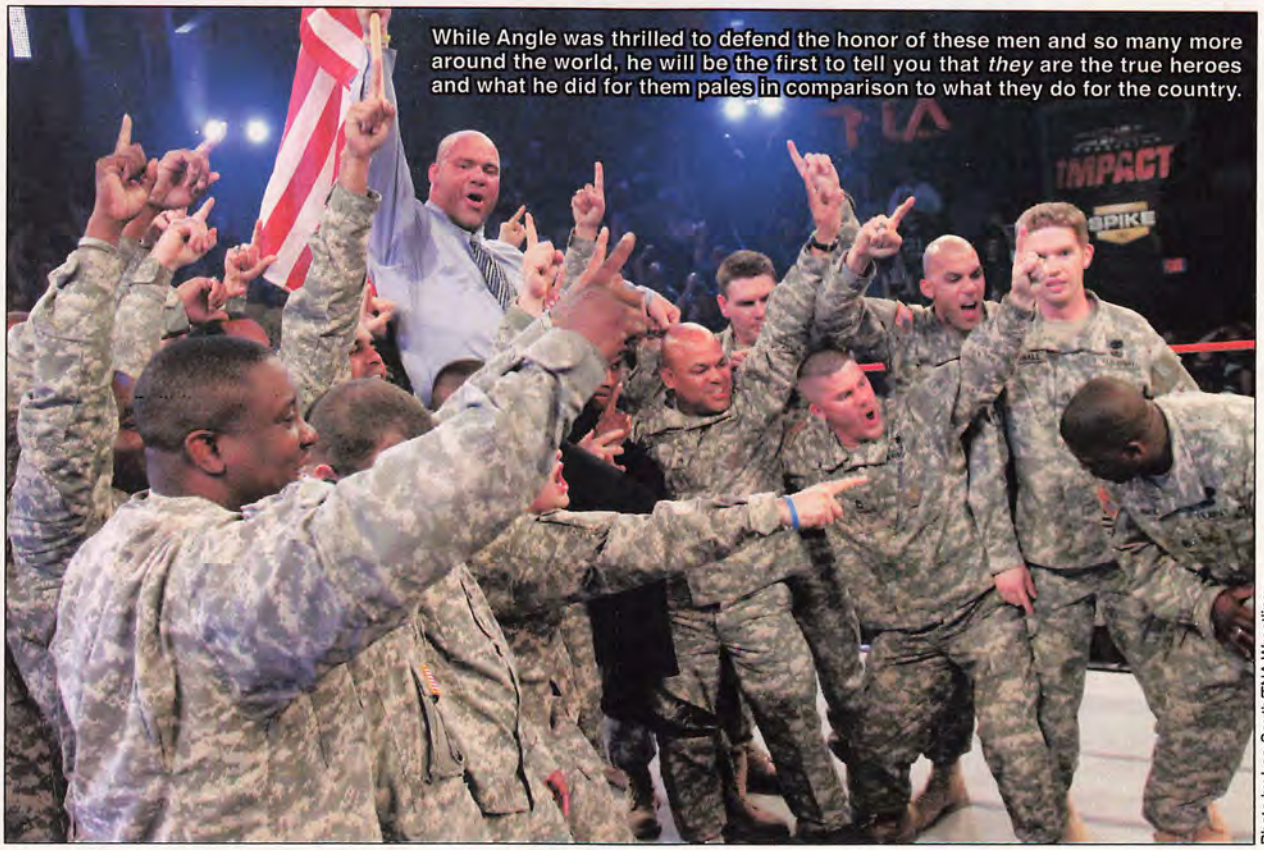
"The thing is that the chairman of that company likes guys who stand up for themselves ... I stuck my foot in my mouth when I shouldn't have."

you look at that roster and there are guys that get injured time and time again. The Undertaker is good for an injury every year or so. Steve Austin's been injured. Rey Mysterio gets injured. But when you haven't made the right political decisions, and you've been injured a time or two, that could be possible ammo for some of those people who aren't your allies to say, "Boy, he's injured all the time. Is he not reliable?" And when you're not around to defend yourself, that could be your downfall.

Q: I think history has shown that you had some really tough breaks during your WWE career. It seemed every time you were on the cusp of breaking through to that next level—whether it was cashing in your Money in the Bank world title shot and becoming champion or being revealed as Vince McMahon's son—you suffered some kind of setback. Do you wish WWE would have been more sympathetic and understanding?

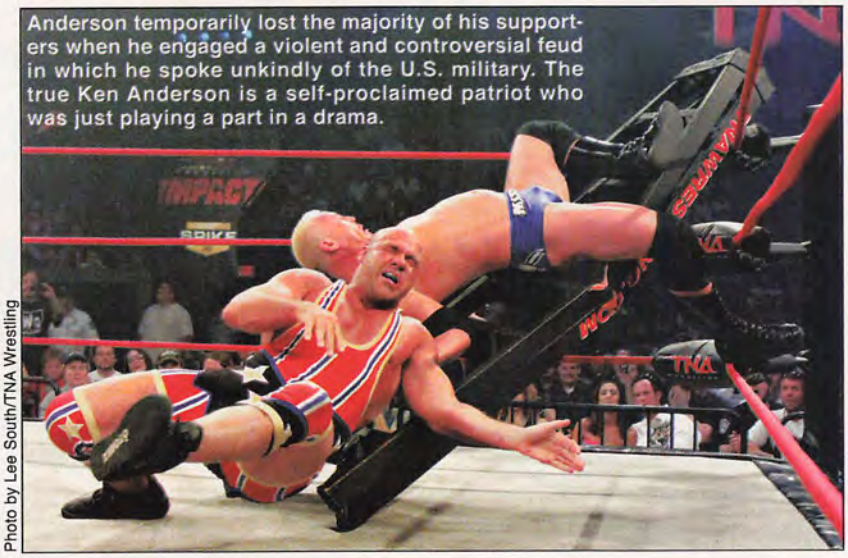
A: I think I'm glad with the way things went down. I can look at myself in the mirror and know that I did, at least in my mind and in the minds of the people I care about, the best that I could do, and I didn't B.S. anybody. I didn't play a part. I didn't want to be one of those "glad-handing yes-men." And I'm happy where I'm at now. Inevitably, the money is not the same as it was in the WWE, but the money is good, and it gives me the opportunity to work toward other things. I don't want to be a wrestler for the rest of my life. I want to do other things, and I'm able to pursue those things. So I really don't have any regrets. There have been some unfortunate circumstances, but I don't take myself out of any of those equations. There were things that happened that were in my control, and I didn't handle some of those things the way I should have."

Q: You mentioned your parents a couple of times already during this interview, and it sounds like they were a big influence in you getting to where you are. I know your father passed away in 2006, right around the time you were starting to make a name for yourself in WWE. Was your dad able to see you achieve your dream? And how hard was it for you to be dealing with that tragedy while still trying to make the most of your big break in WWE?



While Angle was thrilled to defend the honor of these men and so many more around the world, he will be the first to tell you that *they* are the true heroes and what he did for them pales in comparison to what they do for the country.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Anderson temporarily lost the majority of his supporters when he engaged a violent and controversial feud in which he spoke unkindly of the U.S. military. The true Ken Anderson is a self-proclaimed patriot who was just playing a part in a drama.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

day get a regular job on television must have been a huge gamble.

A: Yes, but so is going to college. How many people do you know that have gone to college and have a four- or five-year degree and do not do anything related to the field that they studied? I always looked at it, even in the independents, as the cost of my education to become a pro wrestler. If it was between paying my light bill or my wrestling school bill, I always chose wrestling. And I incurred a huge amount of debt, just like when a doctor goes to medical school, he comes out hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. And when I got my first big paycheck in WWE, the first thing I did was pay off a lot of my debt. But I've also never lived outside of my means.

Q: It's interesting that, in talking about breaking into the business, you paint a picture of a guy who played the political game perfectly. And, yet, the perception among many fans is that it was politics that led to your fallout with WWE, what with stories of your public relations missteps. Do you care to clear that up at all?

A: The thing is that the chairman of that company likes guys who stand up for themselves. He likes guys who aren't just pushovers, who aren't just "glad-handing, nonsensical yes-men," to quote another wrestler (CM Punk). And yet, it depends on what day it is and what side of the bed he woke up on. So it's really a gamble. If you're a pushover and you're a wimp and you say, "Yes, yes, yes, yes," you're going to get steamrolled regardless of how talented you are. But if you don't, if you play it the other way, you have a chance of being successful. Like you said, I made some mistakes. I stuck my foot in my mouth when I shouldn't have. I spoke up when I shouldn't have. None of it was with bad intentions. What's more, this is the wrestling business and some guys get injured. The interesting thing for me is that

Photo by George Tahinos/TNA Wrestling

The culmination of the Anderson-Angle feud took place inside a cage at Lockdown 2010 with Angle fittingly taking the victory by choking out Anderson with his dog tags. The brutal exhibition was voted second runner-up for Match of the Year by the readers of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*.

"How many people do you know that have gone to college and have a four- or five-year degree and do not do anything related to the field that they studied? I always looked at it, even in the independents, as the cost of my education to become a pro wrestler."

They're going to think you're a joke or a jobber." I think things have changed. In the old days, they had territories and that's where they scouted for talent. It was almost like Double-A or Triple-A ball clubs. But, nowadays there's nowhere for them to scout talent. And I thought, *They're not going to be knocking down my door, so I need to be doing everything I can to make them notice me.* It's all in how you behave. And if I could do a good job in putting somebody else over, then they could see that I have talent.

I was up there doing one of those job matches, and it was Tommy Dreamer and Paul Heyman and some other guys that came over. And they asked me, "Hey, who trained you?" And I told them I was trained in Green Bay by some guys you never heard of, and then I went to finishing school with Brad Rheingans. And they didn't care that I had been a job guy. It never even dawned on me. It was, I'm going to do whatever it takes to get there. I never had a doubt. Other people had doubts, including my parents. The last [WWE preliminary match] I did was against William Regal. I can't remember where it was, because I had so many of them back then. Afterward, Paul Heyman and Arn Anderson came up to me and said, "The next time we're hiring, we're going to throw your name into the hat." But I've always thought, in wrestling, you believe none of what you hear and half of what you see. So I didn't expect anything. So I called Tommy Dreamer every two weeks after that. It would be, "Hey, this is Ken Anderson from Green Bay." And he'd say (*sounding irritated*), "Hello, Ken Anderson from Green Bay. What can I do for you?" And eventually he called me and said, "I've got a job for you. I'm not sure where you're going to go, but sit tight."

Q: What did they have for you?

A: They were going to send me to the new developmental group they had just set up in Atlanta, Deep South Wrestling, which was run by Bill DeMott. But I really wanted to go to OVW (Ohio Valley Wrestling) because OVW was already established. I wasn't sure if DSW was going to be a sure thing. So I looked for an apartment in Louisville and called Tommy Dreamer and asked him if he could get me a spot in OVW because I had found a place there and needed to give a security deposit for them to hold it for me. And he said, "All right. You can send in your security deposit and that's where I'm going to send you."

At this point, they didn't even know what they were going to do with me. It was just, "Sit tight." The next time I called Tommy I told him I was in Louisville and wanted to go down to OVW and meet some people. And he asked if I was there looking at apartments, and I said, no, I had already moved here. And so he said, "In that case, you can start tomorrow if you want." I heard of so many people who were hired by WWE and just sat at home waiting to get a call, and ended up getting fired. I wasn't going to give WWE an opportunity to forget about me.

Q: I'm always amazed by stories like yours, because I know the incredible risk and sacrifice required in taking that step. I know some people who have turned down the opportunity. WWE's developmental system, especially back then, was far from glamorous. To pick up your whole life and move down there just for the slim chance that you might one

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

The Impact Zone is filled with people who are not ashamed to share the dirty, dark secret that they are *wholly* with Mr. Anderson every step of the way.

hands on. I read every book that I can get my hands on. I watched a lot of movies. One of the parallels that most people don't make—and it really kind of irritates me to some degree—is with acting. I'll go in front of casting directors now that I'm trying to break into TV and movies. Already seeing that I've been in the wrestling business for 13 years, they'll ask me if I have any acting experience. And I'm like, "Yeah. At the bare minimum I have 13 years, because that's what we do." So yeah, I watched a lot of movies. At independent shows I would stand behind the curtain and watch the matches. If I was in a dark match in WWE or TNA, I would always pick the brains of the people I would work with. Every time I would go up, I would always try to get some kind of knowledge, and I would go back and apply it in my independent wrestling. My thoughts were that I can take this stuff and I can apply it to my next match.

I sent my first tape to WWE when I had only been in the wrestling business for a year and people were saying, "Don't do it. They're going to see how inexperienced you are." I thought, *Great. Because in two years, when I send my second tape, they'll see how much I've improved.*

Q: You mentioned working dark matches in WWE and TNA. Did you ever worry that, in taking those jobs, you might be pigeonholed as an "enhancement" guy and it might hurt you in the long run in getting a meaningful spot in a major promotion?

A: I was never worried about that, even though I had countless indy vets telling me time and time again, "They're never going to take you seriously. They're going to laugh at you.

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Anderson was on the verge of being revealed as the second son of Vince and Linda McMahon when out-of-the-ring issues cost him his job in WWE (above). When Anderson's spot went to Hornswoggle, he didn't cry over his misfortune (below); he proceeded with his life, determined to take better advantage of future opportunities.

Photo by Stu Saks

"I was never drawn to the Chris Benoits and the Dean Malenkos when I was starting out in the wrestling business. I was more into 'Stone-Cold' Steve Austin and The Rock–the more character-driven type of wrestlers."

occasionally with my dad. Every once in a while, my dad would let me stay up that late. It wasn't very often. It was that and the Sunday morning show WWE had. And back then, as far as I remember, we didn't have a lot of channels: 2, 5, 11, 26, and 38 were the only channels we had. I remember the Junkyard Dog was my favorite. It was just something about him. He had the music, the chains. Then I remember further down the line watching wrestling and wondering why the guys just didn't hang on to the ropes when they got shot in—why they always turned around and came back. And I remember seeing an arm ringer and thinking, *That doesn't hurt.* I could see his arm moving. And it started losing its luster.

Q: It's interesting that you were a big fan of JYD, because you can definitely draw some parallels there. You're certainly a talented wrestler, but, like the Dog, I think it's fair to say that you've made a name for yourself more from the showmanship side of the business. Would you agree?

A: Sure. I looked at everybody, but I was never drawn to the Chris Benoits and the Dean Malenkos when I was starting out in the wrestling business. I was more into "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin and The Rock—the more character-driven type of wrestlers. I've always watched those guys the most. I've always looked at the showmen. The guys who made the most amount of money in this business—Rock, Austin, Flair—they did it mainly through talking.

Q: I guess the challenge in choosing to be that kind of wrestler is that they can't really teach you to be charismatic in wrestling school. So where did you look to learn how to be an entertainer?

Photo by George Napolitano

As "Mr. Kennedy," Anderson made a huge mark at WrestleMania 23, winning the eight-way Money in the Bank ladder match. The man he beat for the prize was CM Punk, but there was some irony in the fact that one of the participants he eliminated with this Ken-ton bomb was Hornswoggle.

A: Honestly, I looked everywhere. When I was studying to become a wrestler, I left no stone unturned. I watched every video I could get my

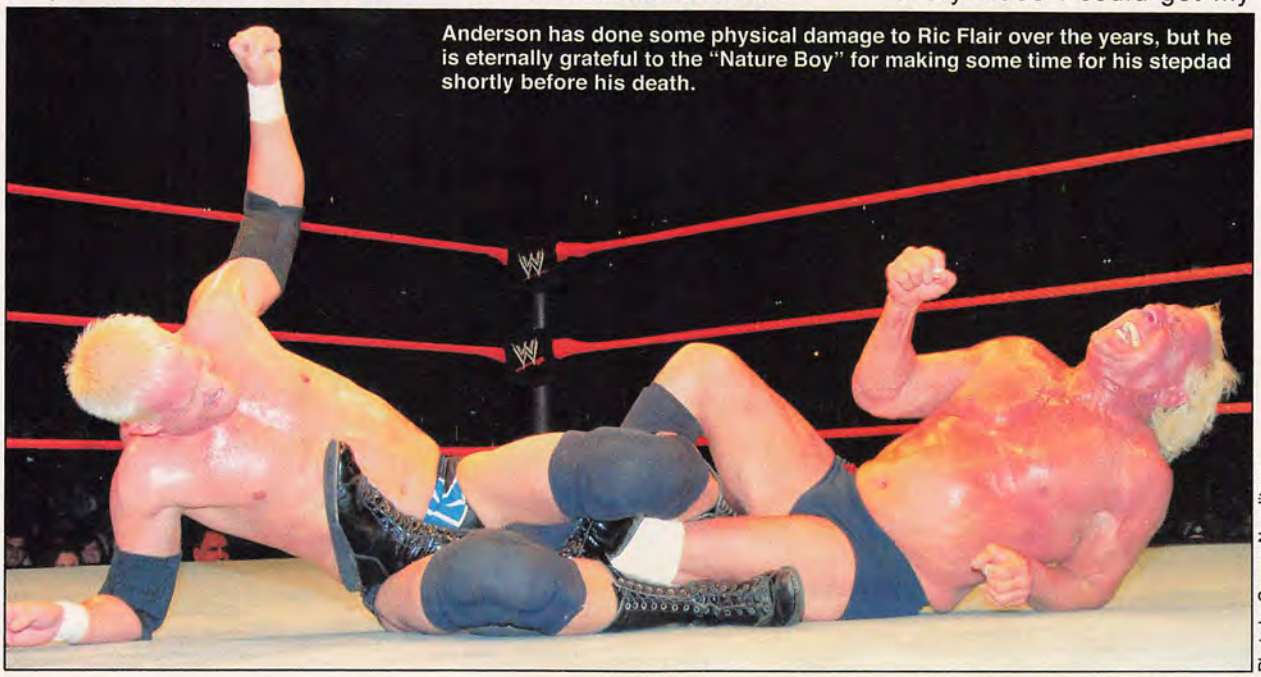

Photo by George Napolitano

Anderson has done some physical damage to Ric Flair over the years, but he is eternally grateful to the "Nature Boy" for making some time for his stepdad shortly before his death.

Photo by George Napolitano
PRO WRESTLING IS REAL
MR ANDERSON
HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION
TNA

Mr. Anderson

"I want to be a part of taking the company to the next level."

FOLLOWING THE DEBUTS of Hulk Hogan, Eric Bischoff, Ric Flair, and Jeff Hardy weeks earlier, it would have been easy to mistake Ken Anderson's arrival in TNA in January 2010 as that of just another ex-WWE star looking to cash in on his former glory in a new setting. But in the weeks and months following his TNA debut, it became apparent that Anderson's mission in returning to wrestling after being fired from WWE in 2009 was not an easy paycheck, but redemption.

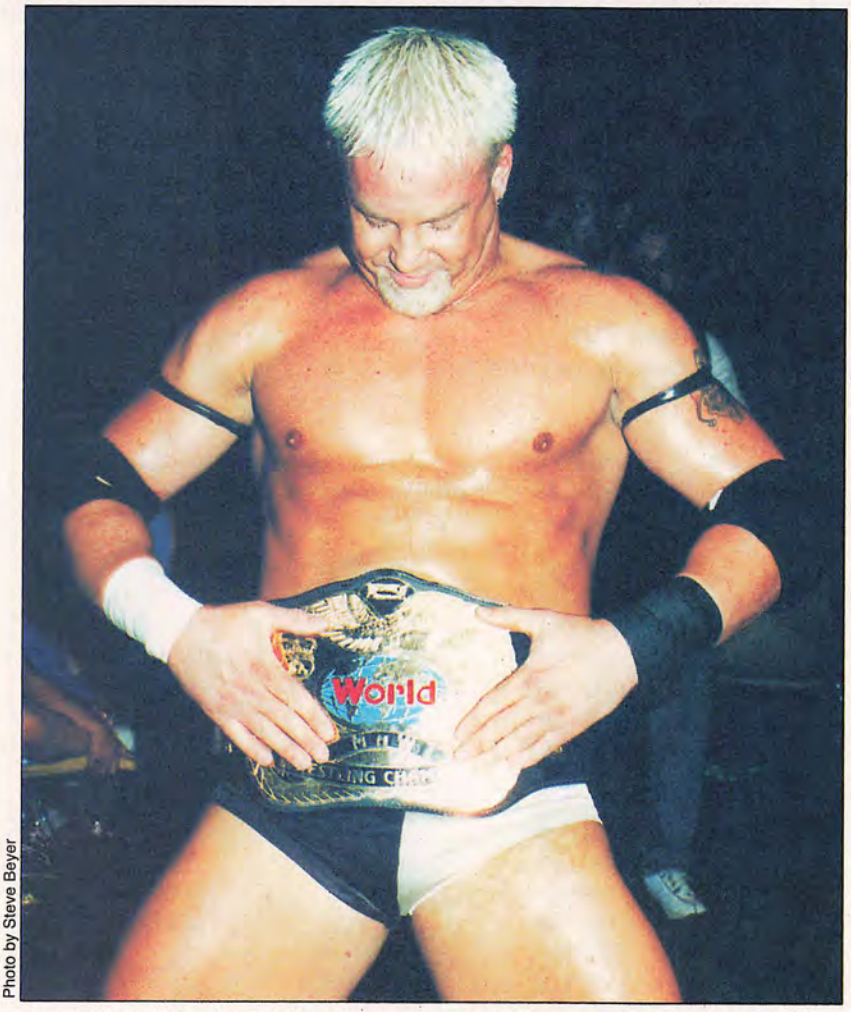

Photo by Steve Beyer

As much as "Kamikaze" Ken Anderson admired his Mid-American Wrestling championship belt in 2003, he knew he had the talent and drive to make a bigger splash in this business.

Once on the fast track to becoming a world champion and even a "McMahon," the former Mr. Kennedy's WWE career was derailed by untimely injuries and political snafus. Given the chance to prove that he was not given a fair shake by his past employer, Anderson set out in TNA to fulfill his potential. And he's appeared to do just that.

Less than two years since arriving in TNA, the former Army reservist has headlined the company's biggest show of the year, been embroiled in some of the most memorable feuds in the promotion's history, and, this year, earned his first and second world titles—including the one in his possession as of press time. Anderson's next goal in wrestling may be his loftiest—helping elevate TNA's profile as a legitimate competitor and alternative to WWE.

In this 90-minute interview, conducted by Senior Writer Al Castle on June 30 two weeks before he lost the TNA World title to Sting, Anderson discusses his childhood dream of being a pro wrestler, his tenure in WWE, his vision for TNA, and much more.

Q: Let's start at the very beginning. What was your earliest experience of watching pro wrestling, either in person or on television?

A: The earliest experiences I can remember were watching *Saturday Night's Main Event*

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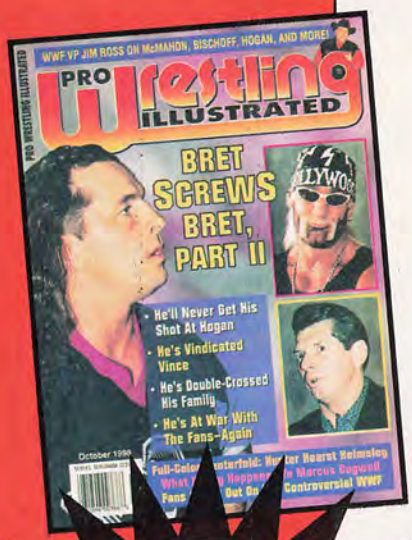

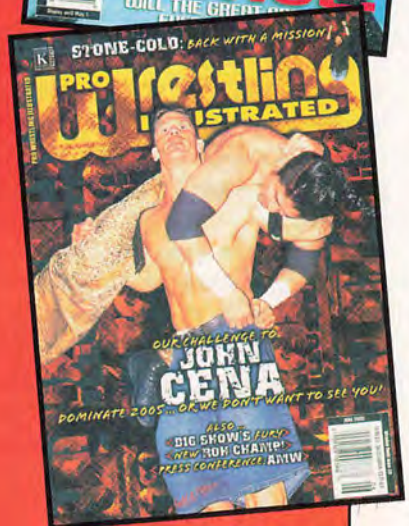

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FULL-COLOR BEGINNING WITH HOLIDAY 2000

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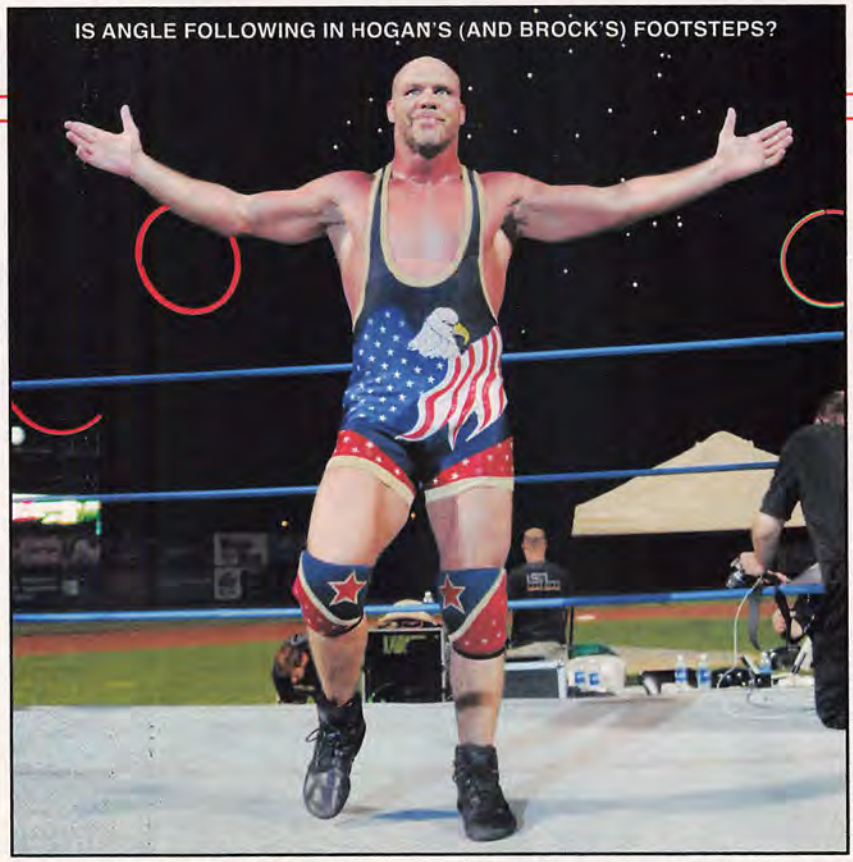

IS ANGLE FOLLOWING IN HOGAN'S (AND BROCK'S) FOOTSTEPS?

Photo by George Napolitano

to what could be a remarkable one beginning, as Davey Richards finally won the Ring of Honor championship by beating partner Eddie Edwards in an insanely physical match. ROH reported later that both men were treated for migraines, arm/leg injuries, and dehydration afterward, and I'm half-surprised the damage wasn't worse. Early word from this scribe is that Richards could turn out to be the longest-reigning ROH champ before his run is over. ¶Also worth watching in ROH is the situation involving Kevin Steen. Six months ago, Steen was forced out of ROH as the result of a loss to former partner El Generico. He returned without permission here, but before he could be escorted out of the Hammerstein Ballroom, he dashed to the ring and, shockingly, instead of helping old pal Steve Corino out of a little jam with The House of Truth, he, too, attacked Corino and floored him with a "Package Piledriver." Then he spat on Jim Cornette as he was hauled away. ¶Cornette says Steen, once an everyman-type fan favorite in ROH, will never wrestle for the company again. You know as well as I do how vows like that turn out. But I'm not sure Corino has it in him to stop a monster he helped create.

BUFFALO, NY: Note to self: Next time you agree to meet up with Dan Murphy for a show in his neck of the woods, save the bar-hopping until the night after the card. Let's just say it would have been interesting had Murph been born into this wrestling journalism racket a few decades earlier, back when Jim Beam and I had a much closer and friendlier relationship. ¶Anyway, TNA did a few outdoor BaseBrawl shows this summer, and we stumbled in for this one at Coca-Cola Field not too far from some of Murph's favorite haunts. Pretty good show, and everyone seemed to have fun. ¶In the main event, Kurt Angle beat TNA World champ Mr. Anderson in a non-title match. Even at this stage of the game, it's clear that Angle has no dog in him whatsoever. Here he is at a small house show, with no TV cameras and no way to add to his championship resume, but he's still out there busting his tail in 90-degree temperatures, throwing suplex after suplex and slam after slam. Anderson was no slouch, either. ¶Yet as much as I admire Kurt's professionalism, I have to say that I see some Hulk Hogan and Ric Flair in him, and that isn't a compliment. Just saying I hope that unlike Hogan, Flair, and a certain veteran journalist, Angle will know when to walk away from this crazy business.

BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA: I've been starting to rekindle my affection for simple house shows of late, and this leg of the Raw brand's tour Down Under was worth the trip. Okay, this show and the fact that I got a few days of R-and-R with an old buddy from the States who moved here a decade ago. The Aussies clearly love their WWE, and tonight we all went to a wrestling show, and a lovefest broke out at the end. Would you believe me if I told you it was between John Cena and CM Punk? ¶Just days after Punk let loose with a promo at the end of a *Raw* broadcast that people are still talking about, and just weeks before the two were to clash at Money in the Bank, Cena just barely beat Punk in a bout that went nearly half an hour and had more drama than your average house show main event. ¶Took three Attitude Adjustments for Cena to leverage the victory. Then the real fun began. Punk told fans of his respect for Cena and his willingness (compared with The Rock) to perform for them night after night. After they exchanged a handshake, Cena acknowledged Punk as the best wrestler in the company today and said he couldn't wait to face him on PPV, that it'd be bigger than his WrestleMania match with Rock. So much for Punk's image as the ultimate rebel, *eh, mate?* □

plain speaking

With Matt Brock

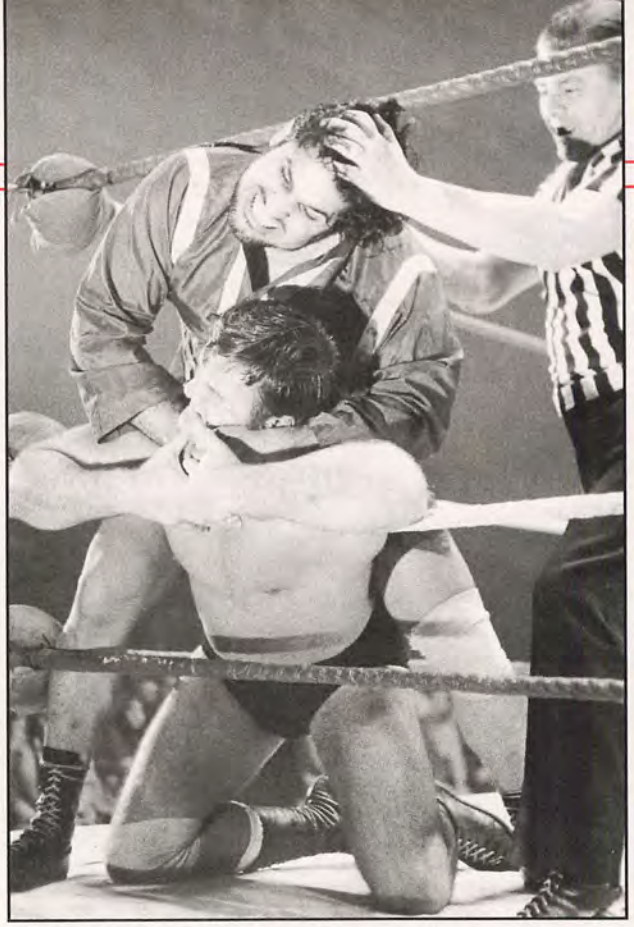
Harder than nails, veteran wrestling reporter Matt Brock has logged more miles covering wrestling than any other journalist. Every month Matt will travel to the sport's hotbeds, reporting everything he sees without fear or favor

UNION CITY, NJ: Been a while since I took in a Women Superstars Uncensored show, and though yours truly is hardly the biggest cheerleader of the fairer sex inside the ring, the promotion's de facto hub, the entirely dumpy Ace Arena on a very dumpy Sip Street in this entirely dumpy town is just across the river from the Big Apple, so what better to do on a warm and sleepy Saturday night? ¶Turned out I witnessed the end of the career of Cindy Rogers, a woman whose work inside the squared circle I can appreciate. Real meat-and-potatoes type, if that description can be applied to a woman. Never cared a whit about all the glitz, glamour, and attitude you see from your average Diva or Knockout today. Rogers is a tough, no-frills, blue-collar kind of woman who just loved to soak in the competition of it all. If you never saw her during her decade or so in the ring or never even heard of her, she seems like the type who will forgive you. No huge ego or attitude here. Injuries cut her career short, but I doubt she has any regrets, and nice to see her go out a winner against Allison Danger. ¶Also bore witness to what I am told was the 44th successful title defense made by WSU champ Mercedes Martinez. I've written about Mercedes in this space before, about how she could probably anchor the WWE or TNA women's division. Probably doesn't have enough silicone in her body to get the call, however. ¶Anyway, Martinez appeared to lose the belt to Brittney Savage but had her foot on the ropes during the three-count, and the dazed original ref missed it. One restart later, she rallied for the win. Yeah, she's really slipping. Then again, she did suffer a stinger in the match, so she's excused.

NEW YORK, NY: Less than 24 hours after I saw one remarkable title reign continue, I bore witness

Photo by Frank Krewda

CLOSE CALL FOR MARTINEZ



As Jacques Rougeau can attest, few wrestlers were more savage than Tiger Jeet Singh, whose barbarism kept him in contention for the NWA and WWWF championships for years.

Tiger Ali Singh generated lots of heat among fans portraying a Punjabi version of "The Million-Dollar Man." But injuries and travel demands convinced the junior Singh to make an early exit from wrestling. He is now active in the real estate business.

Christmas toy drive to raise money for leukemia research after a relative was diagnosed with the illness.

"It was a great opportunity to fight the ignorance between cultures and to celebrate diversity," Singh Jr. said. "I showed up, dressed as Santa, complete with a red turban, which showed people that it wasn't about religious differences and that we had a sense of humor. Everyone with a turban isn't Osama Bin Laden."

Singh Sr. established the Tiger Jeet Singh Foundation to support charities around Milton, which is one of the fastest-growing communities in Canada, with its population exploding from 20,000 to more than 100,000 over the past 20 years. The Singhs have worked with Squared Circle Wrestling to present Tiger Fest, an annual wrestling fundraiser, using wrestling to draw corporate sponsors and donations to support worthy causes.

When a new K-7 grade school was erected in Milton, members of the community were allowed to suggest individuals to honor with naming rights. Singh was selected, and in October 2010, Tiger Jeet Singh School was dedicated. It is only the second school ever to be named after a pro wrestler, following "Whipper" Billy Watson.

Singh's wrestling connections caused some controversy, however. "Honestly, the majority of people didn't even know he was a wrestler. They knew him for his work in the community first and foremost," Singh Jr. said. The school board, despite the controversy, unanimously selected Singh.

Today, the Singhs share one message with Ontario youth: Stay in school, stay away from drugs, and stay Tiger-fit. □

Photo courtesy of Tiger Jeet Singh Jr.

The Singh family has a long tradition of organizing charity events, such as this Christmas toy drive. Aside from benefiting those in need, the Singhs feel such events break down cultural barriers.

whatever happened to...

By Dan Murphy

TIGER JEET & TIGER ALI SINGH

DURING HIS WRESTLING heyday, Tiger Jeet Singh was a man who intimidated opponents and terrified fans, making his way to the ring with a sharpened scimitar clenched menacingly between his teeth.

Today, the local elementary school in his hometown of Milton, Ontario, bears his name.

Both Tiger Jeet Singh and his son, Tiger Jeet Singh Jr. (who competed in the WWF as Tiger Ali Singh in the late-1990s) were known for their roughhouse tactics inside the ring. But these days, the Singhs are known much more for their charitable work and civic contributions than creating pro wrestling mayhem.

"Charity has always been part and parcel of our family, but we never talked about it. It was always anonymous," Singh Jr. said in a recent phone interview. "The media eventually got a hold of it, and we realized we could use our celebrity to create a greater awareness of the causes we support."

For more than 30 years, the Singhs have called suburban Toronto home.

Singh Sr. emigrated from his native India to Toronto in the early-1960s. He made his wrestling debut in 1965 and became a headliner in the Toronto territory, challenging for both the NWA and WWWF World championships and drawing 18,000 fans to Maple Leaf Gardens to watch him battle The Sheik. Singh wisely invested his earnings from his wrestling days, delving into the real estate market.

Photo Courtesy of Tiger Jeet Singh Jr.

Though they were controversial in the ring during their careers, both Tiger Jeet and Tiger Ali Singh (on right) are generous philanthropists, and were inducted into Milton, Ontario's 2009 Walk of Fame.

"My father was raised by parents who were very tight financially. Every penny counted," Singh Jr. said. "He learned that land shrinks, it never grows, and that you'll never go wrong when you put money in land."

Singh went on to become a main-eventer in Japan and Mexico, feuding with the likes of Antonio Inoki, El Canek, Terry Funk, and Ric Flair. He continued to wrestle into the 1990s in Japan before settling into retirement.

As the elder Singh was winding down his career, his son was starting his run with the WWF. As Tiger Ali Singh, he won the Kuwaiti Cup in 1997, beating Owen Hart in the finals of a tournament in Iraq. He underwent a character change, developing the persona of a rich, arrogant heel in the mold of "The Million-Dollar Man."

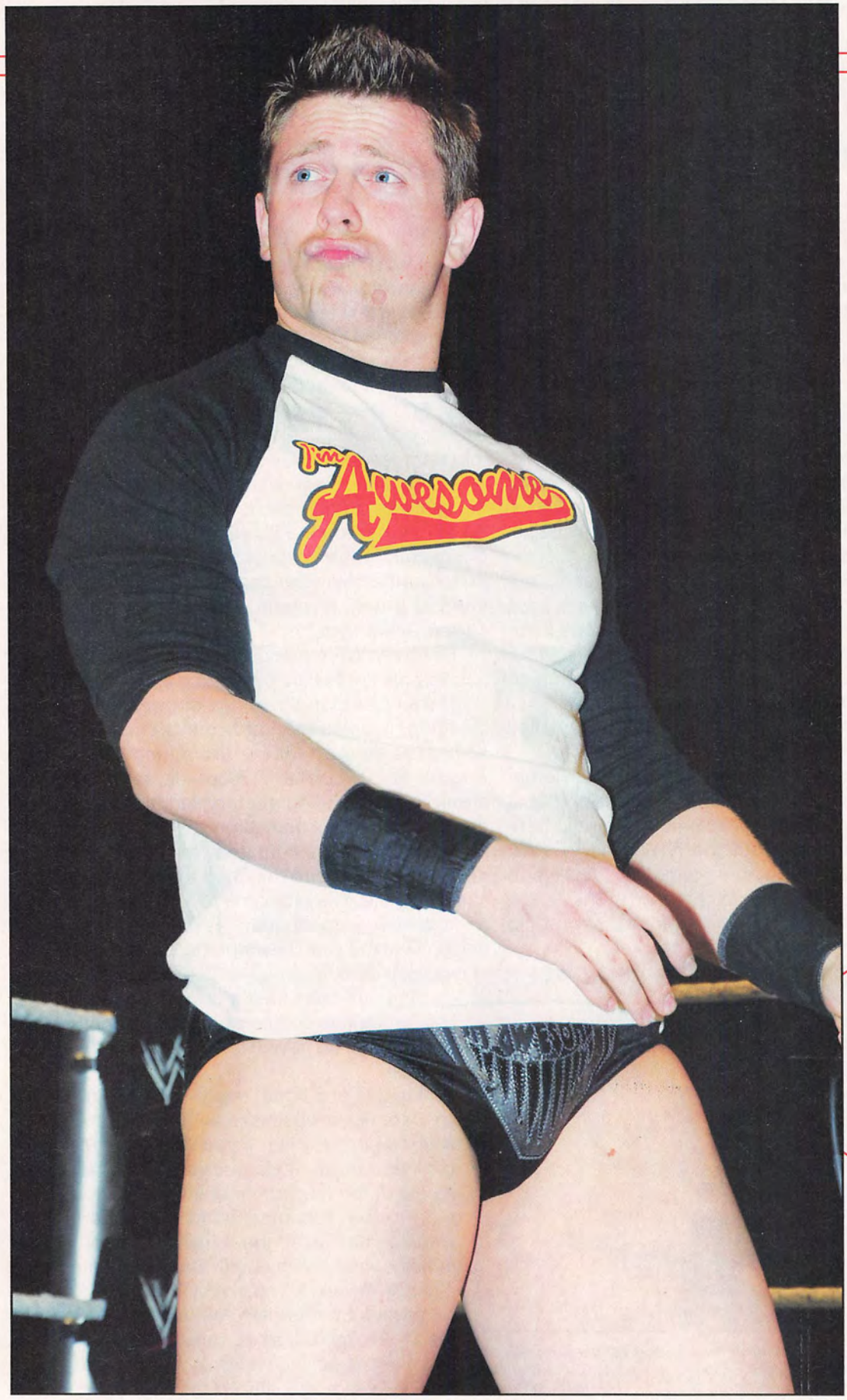
Singh's WWF run ended when he suffered a concussion-his third-while competing in Puerto Rico.

"I was sitting in this dingy shower room. I was bleeding. I vomited. And I had this thought. *I didn't want to be the next Bruiser Brody, and die in a locker room in Puerto Rico*," Singh Jr. said. "I left the arena in my wrestling gear, hailed a cab, and went straight to the San Juan airport. I changed my flight and wanted to leave right away for Toronto. I passed out on the plane and they had to wake me up with smelling salts. They took me to a hospital in Buffalo and the neurosurgeon there asked why I got on that plane, saying it was 'beyond medical science' that I was still alive."

Singh Jr. later filed a lawsuit against WWE. Though he has competed on occasion in recent years, Singh Jr. says his WWE days are firmly in the past.

"My dad and I both enjoyed the business, but we were never obsessed with the business. We looked at it like a job. If you worked at Microsoft and then went to Apple, you wouldn't still be hanging out in the lunchroom at Microsoft. You move on," he said. "I'm thankful for the opportunities wrestling has given me. I had a taste of the life and saw what it was about. Dad taught me never to chase money. If you invest in your family, they will always be there for you. Money comes and goes." Today, Singh Jr. enjoys working in real estate and coaching his son's soccer team.

A few years ago, the Singhs helped organize a



THE MIZ

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capsule profile 362

THE MIZ

BORN IN Parma, Ohio, on October 8, 1980 ... Attended Normandy High School, where he was the captain of both the basketball and cross-country teams ... Also participated in swimming and student government ... Enrolled at Miami University and majored in business ... Dropped out and moved to Southern California to pursue acting career ... Got big break when he was cast to appear on the 10th season of MTV's *The Real World* ... Appeared in multiple seasons of its spin-off series, *Real World/Road Rules Challenge* ... During an episode of *The Real World*, first displayed an alter ego known as "The Miz" ... Character was loud, combative, and obnoxious, as opposed to the laidback nature of the "real life" Mike Mizanin ... Also appearing on such programs as *Bravo's Battle Of The Network Reality Stars* and *Fear Factor* ... Decided to use The Miz persona to pursue a pro wrestling career, something he admitted to dreaming of from an early age ... Joined Rick Bassman's Ultimate Pro Wrestling, and began training at the Ultimate University ... Made in-ring debut in 2003 ... Was cast for the fourth season of WWE's *Tough Enough* ... Outlasted six other hopefuls and made it to the final round, losing to Daniel Puder ... Earned a WWE developmental contract as a result of strong showing ... Was sent to Deep South Wrestling to train under Bill DeMott ...Beat Mike Knox in a tournament final to crown the inaugural DSW champion in December 2005... Transferred to Ohio Valley Wrestling in early-2006 ... Debuted "Miz TV" backstage segment ... Teamed with Chris Cage to capture the OVW Southern tag team title, defeating Chet the Jett and Seth Skyfire ... Was introduced as the new "host" of *Smackdown* ... Duties included announcing the planned card at the top of the show, hyping up the crowd, and conducting backstage interviews ... Became host of the annual Diva Search competition, appearing on *Raw* and *Smackdown* ... Moved to ECW in 2007 Supplemental Draft ... Became self-proclaimed "chick magnet" while possessing the contracts of Extreme Expose members Kelly Kelly, Layla, and Brooke Adams ... Won first WWE championship when he teamed with John Morrison to defeat Matt Hardy and MVP for the WWE tag team title ... Debuted "Dirt Sheet" segment on WWE website with Morrison in which they mocked other wrestlers and facets of pop culture ... After losing tag titles in a Fatal Four-Way at The Great American Bash, regained them from CM Punk and Kofi Kingston at a house show ... Lost the belts to Carlito and Primo Colon at WrestleMania 25 ... Drafted to Raw ... Viciously attacked Morrison afterward, officially ending their partnership ... Adopted new ring attire and began using the Skull Crushing Finale as his finisher ... Beat Kingston to win the U.S. title ... Teamed with Big Show to defeat D-X for Unified tag title ... Announced as Daniel Bryan's "Pro" for the first season of *NXT* ... The two immediately began butting heads ... Found biggest fan in announcer Michael Cole, who praised his every move ... Lost tag title to The Hart Dynasty on *Raw* ... Was knocked out by The Big Show afterward ... Lost U.S. title in a major upset to Bret Hart ... Regained it at Fatal 4-Way, defeating R-Truth, Morrison, and Zack Ryder ... Returned for second season of *NXT,* to mentor Alex Riley ... Won Money in the Bank briefcase at the inaugural PPV of the same name ... Lost U.S. title to Bryan at Night of Champions ... Cashed in briefcase to defeat previously weakened Randy Orton to capture the WWE title on *Raw* ... Began rivalry with Jerry "The King" Lawler in which he emerged as champion despite several close calls ... Successfully retained WWE title against John Cena at WM 27 after Cena was attacked by The Rock ... Lost title to Cena in a triple-threat cage match that also included Morrison at Extreme Rules ... Blamed Riley after failing to regain title from Cena ... Eventually, Riley snapped, leading to a heated feud between the two ... Lost to Riley at Capitol Punishment ... Named number-one in the 21st annual "*PWI* 500."

Beating down John Cena is not a lead pipe cinch under any circumstances. For much of the past year, however, it was Cena who was chasing down The Miz—and it was The Miz who was selected number-one in the "*PWI* 500."

Scott Steiner, Christopher-Michinoku.

Aug. 1998: WrestleMania XIV: The *Real* Winners And Losers. Also: Sunny, Curt Hennig, Dan Severn, Ultimo Dragon.

Sept. 1998: Power Surge! While The NWO Fiddles ... These Men Are Burning. Also: Sable, Ultimo-Guerrero, DeGeneration X-Owen, Rocky Maivia, Mad Russian-Rambo.

Oct. 1998 (Special Issue): WCW Midyear Report. Also: Steve Austin, Taka Michinoku, Al Snow, Hollywood Hogan, Roddy Piper, Misawa-Kawada.

Nov. 1998: Austin vs. Goldberg: Who Would Win And Why. Also: Bret Hart, Dude Love, Junkyard Dog, Helmsley-Michaels, Ray-Booker.

Dec. 1998: DDP's Big Bang Theories: Cutting Loose On Life, Love, & The Ultimate Buzz. Also: Sable-Jackie, Mankind, Hogan-Horace, D-Lo, APW.

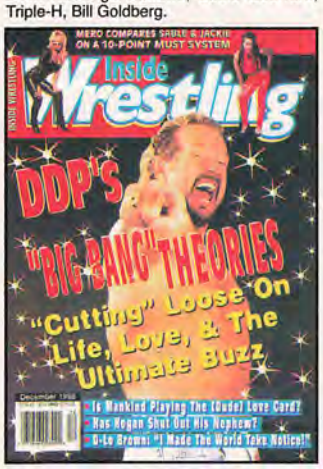
Holiday 1998 (Special Issue): Kane: Still Haunted By His Day Of Glory. Also: Eddie Guerrero, Stevie Ray, Val Venis, Turnbuckle Turkey Awards, bonus calendar.

Jan. 1999: Seasons Greetings With A Bang (DDP & Kimberly). Also: Severn-Shamrock, Konnan, Arn, Undertaker-Kane, Chris Jericho.

March 1999: Estrange Situation! Insider Reveals: "Shane Still Resents His Father! Also: X-Pac, Hogan-Warrior, Jesse Ventura, Billy Kidman, Scott Norton.

April 1999 (Special Issue): The 1999 Inside Wrestling Computer Tournament. Also: Bossman-McMahon, Steiner & Bischoff, Hollywood Hogan, Wrath, Blue Meanie.

May 1999: Team Corporate's WrestleMania Scare! Mankind's Title Victory Could Have Spoiled Everything! Also: New Age Outlaws, Eddie Guerrero, Triple-H, Bill Goldberg.



June 1999: Still In-Vince-Ible! What Will It Take To Topple This Man? Also: Rey Misterio Jr., ECW, Triple-H, NWO, Blue Meanie.

July 1999 (Special Issue): Top Stars Answer Your Personal Questions. Also: Vince McMahon, Vincent, Eric Bischoff, Giant Baba.

Aug. 1999: WrestleMania XV: The *Real* Winners And Losers! Also: Vam Dam-Lynn, Saturn, Goldust, Steiner-Bagwell.

Oct. 1999 (Special Issue): WCW Midyear Report. Also: Mankind & Shamrock, Snow-Holly, Sting, Edge, Flair-Robinson, AIWF.

Nov. 1999: Crash At The Bash! Enter Sid, Viciously! Also: Undertaker-Austin, Acolytes, Master P, Debra, Justin Credible.

Dec. 1999: The Rock: What Makes You Love/Hate This Man? Also: Sting, Shane Douglas, Droz, Piper-Bagwell, Taz.

Holiday 1999 (Special Issue): The 1999 Turnbuckle Turkey Awards. Also: Sting, Dogg-Gunn, Undertaker, Steve Corino, 2000 calendar.

Jan. 2000: Dreaming Of An Extreme Christmas (Tommy Dreamer & Francine). Also: Goldberg, Al Snow, Billy Gunn, Doring & Road Kill, cigar-chompers.

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Photo by George Napolitano

With 16 and 15 years on the roster, respectively, it's pretty astonishing to think that Kane and Henry have until this point steered clear of each other, save for brief moments, such as the 2008 Royal Rumble.

When you think about it, the two of them took very different paths to WWE, and their careers have followed decidedly different paths since they got to the big dance. Glen Jacobs was a big, young journeyman when he arrived. He had the size that Vince McMahon has always coveted, but Creative clearly didn't know what it had in the young powerhouse or what he could really do. Hence his trial (and frankly, horrible) runs as evil dentist Dr. Isaac Yankem and The New (and not-at-all-improved) Diesel. Quite frankly, given the ridiculous back story of Kane, which seemed to grow more incredible from week to week in the early days, it's hard to believe the character has been around since 1997. I never thought it would have such staying power.

If anything, Jacobs has proven to be an overachiever. He's not a perennial main-eventer and isn't capable of carrying lesser talents to spectacular matches. He's more the occasional main-eventer who can give you a solid match with just about anyone, but needs a more talented and more athletic opponent to carry him to an outstanding match. Still, after all these years, he still gets great reactions from WWE crowds the world over and is still perceived as a threat of some degree to any opponent and any title. That was helped, of course, by a long-for-this-era (five months) reign as World champion last year.

Henry reminds me more of the first-round NFL draft pick who turns out to be a major bust only if you insist on continuing to judge him as such a high draft pick with all the lofty expectations that come along with that distinction.

Henry was a much-heralded Olympic weightlifter when Vince McMahon struck early in 1996 and signed him to a huge 10-year contract. By 2006, he was still nowhere near the main event. Still isn't (and winning the ECW title doesn't count). Despite a long list of injuries and many layoffs as a result, Henry not only fulfilled that entire deal, but has signed an additional contract or three since then. Somewhere along the way, WWE wisely stopped expecting him to live up to all the initial hype and just looked for him to contribute. Someone in a big, plush office in Stamford still likes what he offers.

Those of us who have been following this business since these two came on to the national scene have seen so very many twists, turns, tweaks, and makeovers for Kane and Henry, but in the end, they're both at their best as uncomplicated mean menaces. It's just a question of whether they are doing their menacing on the good or bad side of the fans. Every once in a while, at least one of them attempts to establish himself as an unstoppable physical force, as if we haven't seen him beaten time and time and time again.

Henry has made the most recent foray into this territory *(flip to see feature story in **The Wrestler**, page 46)*, as evidenced by his attack on one side of a steel cage during a *Raw* match between Big Show and Alberto Del Rio. The "World's Strongest Man" part of his persona has been reborn yet again.

This latest feud between Kane and Henry isn't destined to build to a final decisive showdown at WrestleMania 28 in Miami. Truth be told, it probably won't even drag into the fall. Those who can no longer appreciate a simple power-based big man vs. big man feud that was so popular in eras past might not remember it by the time Survivor Series rolls around.

Had they been around during the old territory days, Kane and Henry surely would have benefited from the opportunity to move around and keep their acts fresh. Those days, however, are long gone. And yet Kane and Mark Henry remain, trying to stay relevant and entertaining. I, for one, can appreciate the difficult task and the continued effort. □

on the road

With Dave Lenker

I COME TO you today to celebrate a most uncelebrated feud, to tell you that I have actually enjoyed on some odd level the recent battles between Kane and Mark Henry.

Go ahead and call me crazy or masochistic if you must. I know the action hasn't been exactly, *um,* crisp, athletic, or aesthetically pleasing. This is a filler mid-card feud if there ever was one. But I can appreciate it.

Back in the spring, fellow Senior Writer Al Castle astutely pointed out on our magazines' blog (prowrestlingillustrated.blogspot.com) that these two men are currently the longest tenured full-time wrestlers on the WWE roster (The Undertaker and Triple-H have been with the company longer but can barely be regarded as even part-time competitors at this point). Believe it or not, these two havecombined to log an astounding 31 years in WWE.

They were there to laugh at a faux blueblood named Hunter Hearst Helmsley as he struggled to make headway in the company in the mid-1990s. Surely he was destined to fail and fail quickly and forgettably. Now he's one of their big bosses.

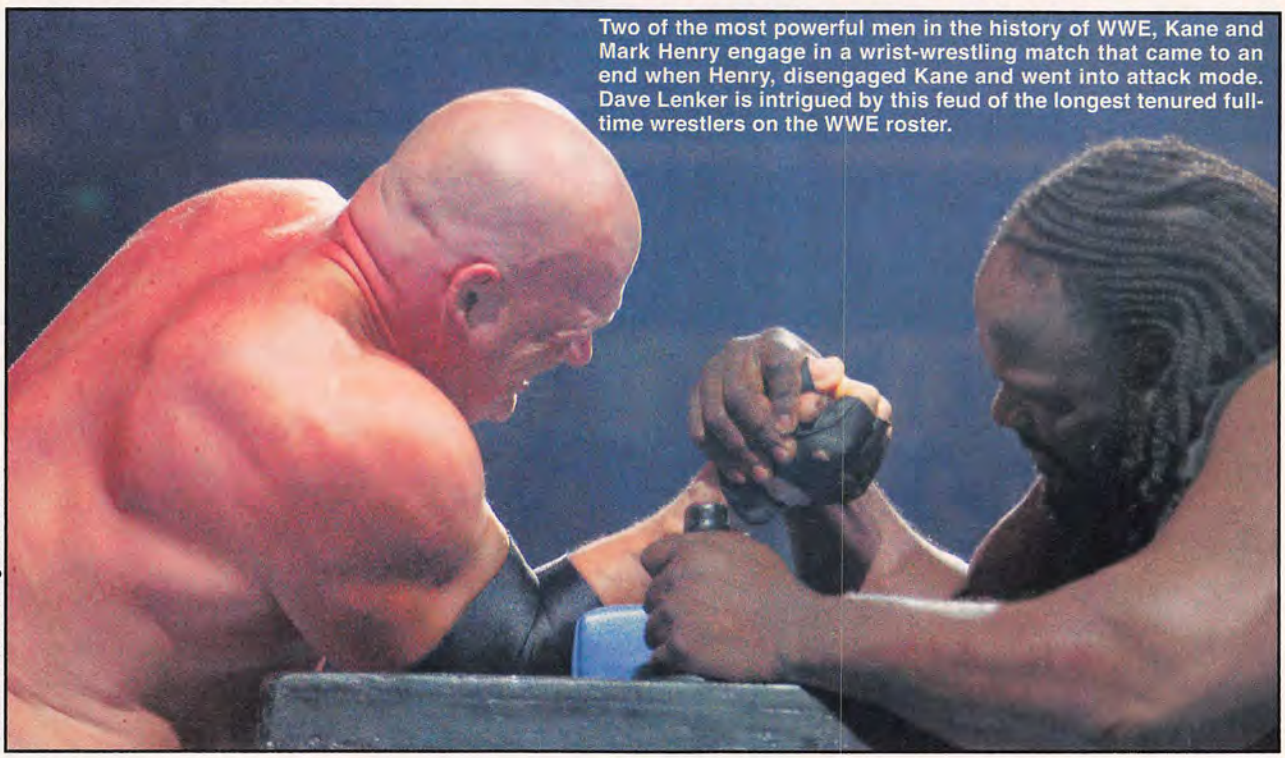
They were there to question whether Steve Austin could ever make a "Ringmaster" gimmick work. Surely there was some better way to make this former Hollywood Blond in WCW a viable WWE star. And there apparently was.

They were around to witness all the ugliness between Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels as it built to a perplexing and messy crescendo at Survivor Series 1997 in Montreal. Surely there was no way those wounds would ever heal. More than a dozen years later, both of those superstars were in the WWE Hall of Fame, and Hart even said he'd gladly do the honor of inducting Michaels if he were asked (he wasn't).

Kane and Henry may have been hanging out together backstage some night 14 or so years ago and wondering whether Vince McMahon would ever inject himself into a storyline, and whether people would get into such an insane idea. No, probably not on both counts.

Kane and Henry saw the heydays of Sable, Sunny, and Trish and could tell you stories about forgettables such as The Godwinns, Flash Funk, The Sultan, and Leif Cassidy.

Somehow they've outlasted them all, so forgive them if maybe they both enjoy a private little chuckle and shake of the head if they ever really take the time to think about this little feud that probably won't be nominated as one of the best of 2011. *All this time and we end up locking horns with each other ...*



Two of the most powerful men in the history of WWE, Kane and Mark Henry engage in a wrist-wrestling match that came to an end when Henry, disengaged Kane and went into attack mode. Dave Lenker is intrigued by this feud of the longest tenured full-time wrestlers on the WWE roster.

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data sheet

CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI

HEIGHT: 6'5"
WEIGHT: 222
HOMETOWN: Lucerne, Switzerland
GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: September 11, 2010—Claudio Castagnoli and Chris Hero, The Kings of Wrestling, cemented their place atop a very strong Ring of Honor tag team division when they defeated former WWE stars Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas at Glory By Honor IX in New York City. For Castagnoli and Hero, the win came amidst a five-month run as Ring of Honor tag team champions. In all, their stretch with the belts fell just two days shy of an entire year. It was the longest in ROH history.
HE DOES IT SO WELL: Castagnoli may be the most versatile wrestler in ROH, if not all of wrestling. He is big enough to trade power moves with heavyweights, yet agile enough to keep pace with smaller, speedier wrestlers. Plus, he has experience in a variety of styles. Having wrestled in Europe, Mexico, Japan, and the U.S., Claudio can dial up the correct approach to wrestle a strong match against any opponent. Most men his size are much more limited in their execution.
WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: Castagnoli could stand to be grittier. His game lacks a down-and-dirty mean streak. When the fight is contained to the ring, Castagnoli's work is virtually flawless. But when teams such as The Briscoe Brothers introduce ringside brawling or weapons, he seems out of place, despite his willingness to bend and break the rules. Claudio is capable of defeating any wrestler on the mat, but he doesn't scare anyone.
PET FINISHER: Alphamare Waterslide (side Death Valley driver), Ricola Bomb power bomb
BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: In September 2008, Castagnoli took on Japanese powerhouse Kensuke Sasake at The Arena in Philadelphia. Although he didn't win the match, Castagnoli stood toe to toe with the legendary tough man, trading strikes, chops, and moves. It was a grueling bout that proved Castagnoli could hang with the most elite wrestlers in the world.
OUTLOOK: As rumors swirl of a WWE deal for him and tag partner Hero, Castagnoli shouldn't be overlooked as a legitimate threat to ROH champion Davey Richards. Granted, most of Castagnoli's success has come as a tag team wrestler, and the Kings of Wrestling could very well reclaim the title from Benjamin and Haas, but an ROH heavyweight championship would certainly look good on his resume if he is indeed headed to Stamford.
QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "Claudio's just a hard dude to wrestle. He can beat you so many ways. The most frustrating thing is that nothing trips him up in the ring. He's experienced in so many styles. He's seen and done it all."—Kenny King

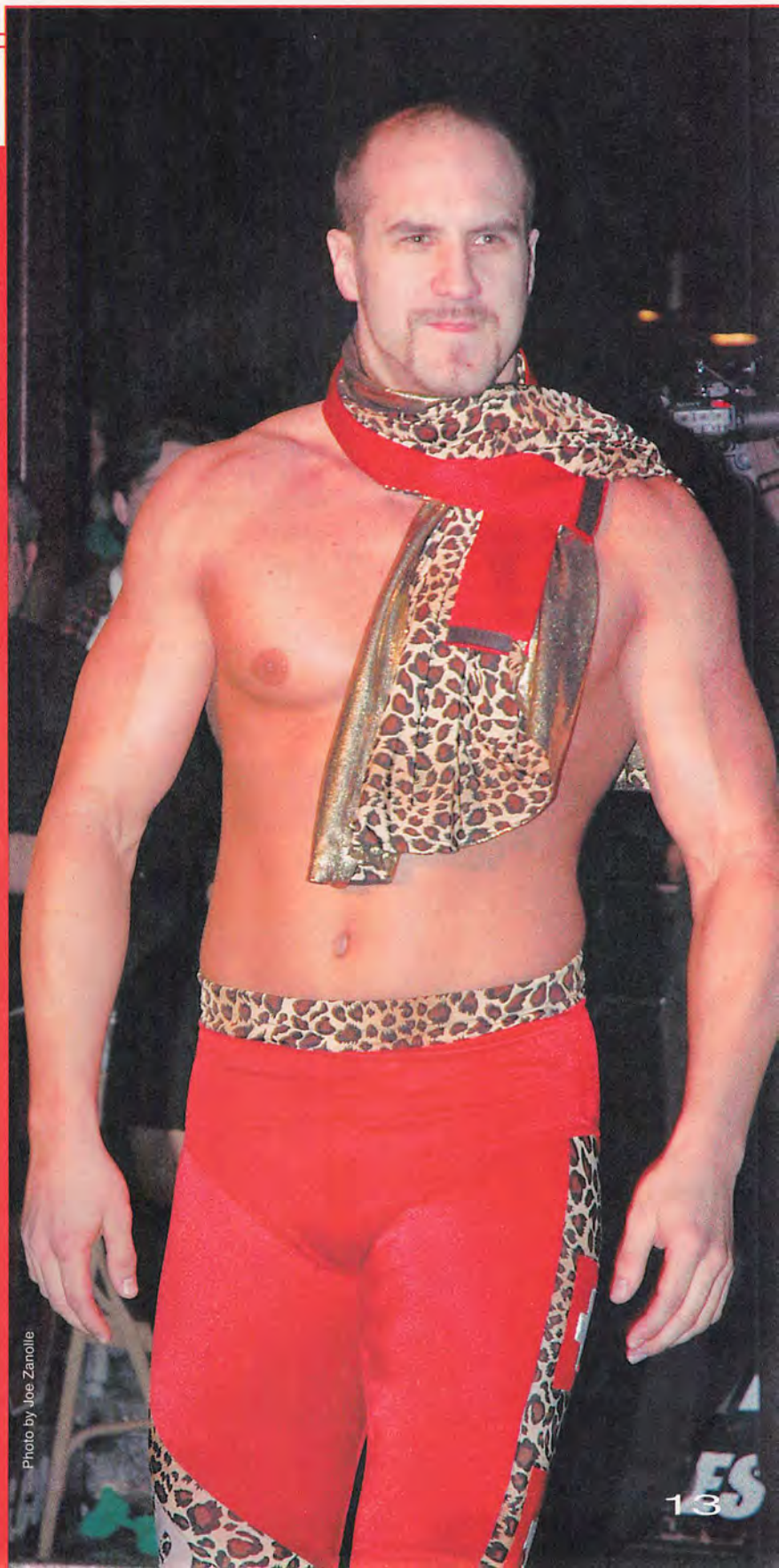

Photo by Joe Zanolle

data sheet

ABYSS

HEIGHT: 6'8"
WEIGHT: 350
HOMETOWN: Parts Unknown
GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: November 19, 2006—Abyss defeated Sting at Genesis to win the NWA World title. Despite the controversial nature of Abyss' title win—Sting was DQ'd for clotheslining referee Rudy Charles—Abyss punished Sting throughout the match, even putting "The Icon" through a table. As strong a showing as he put forth that night, Abyss probably was on track to beat Sting cleanly for the title.
HE DOES IT SO WELL: Abyss physically dominates opponents like few others in TNA. Whether he's facing an X division wrestler or a powerhouse like Matt Morgan, Abyss' kicks, punches, and slams are almost always effective. Most opponents are not suited to offset Abyss' size and power. With his ability to absorb punishment, Abyss' brawling is usually enough to overcome any amount of technical acumen, scientific skill, or aerial ability. And, when he has trouble imposing his will on foes, he's willing to use a weapon, whether it's Janice, his nail-studded board, thumbtacks, or a ringside chair.
WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: Like many big men, Abyss falls short in the conditioning department. He can mask this inadequacy when he's competing against men of comparable size in short matches. But when he has to face faster, more agile wrestlers, Abyss tends to tire, making him susceptible to their maneuvers. It is no secret that Abyss needs to improve his cardiovascular conditioning and pace himself better in the ring. Until he does, any wrestler capable of watching film on Abyss can develop an effective game plan that neutralizes his physical prowess.
PET FINISHER: Black Hole Slam (spinning side slam)
BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: Final Resolution 2008 proved very painful for Abyss in several ways. After suffering a Straight To Hell facebuster onto a barbed-wire-covered chair from half-brother Judas Mesias in the loss, their father, James Mitchell, attempted to set Abyss on fire when he refused to reveal their "family secret." Abyss avenged the loss to Mesias a few weeks later, and bounced back from Mitchell's attack, but even further damage had been done to his already fragile psyche.
OUTLOOK: This TNA original finds himself in a strange place. He lost the X division title to Brian Kendrick, but being such an odd fit for the X division, is Abyss really inspired to take back that belt? Perhaps losing the X title was a blessing in that Abyss now has an opportunity to leave the X division and get on with the business of making a push for the TNA World championship. There is no shortage of compelling matches or interesting opponents for him to challenge in the heavyweight ranks.
QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "I don't think I can find the words to describe what happens when Abyss hits you. It leaves a mark on your body and your mind. Of course, he looks big and nasty, and that's the way he wrestles. Nobody really scares me in the ring, but Abyss comes closer than anyone."—Gunner

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

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and **iCandy** are turning heads in Ocala ... Also, **Alma Maskarada** and **El Diablo Negro** are honing their lucha styles at the Funk dojo.

Still waiting for WWE to produce *The Best Of Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling* and *The Memphis Wrestling Story* DVDs? If so, you'll have to settle for glimpses of the great territorial days on WWE Classics on Demand or assorted other releases. While the fact that WWE doesn't make more use of its 75,000-hour-plus video collection is disappointing, recognize that WWE is becoming—along with INSIDE WRESTLING and our sister publications—the true caretakers of our sport's history. On his jrsbbq.com blog, Jim Ross made yet another mention of the last great video library not yet acquired by WWE: That's the Mid-South Wrestling library, currently handled by Bill Watts' ex-wife and his son.

"To buy a library, there must be two elements in place: an interested buyer and an interested seller," stated Ross. "WWE has a keen interest but has been unable to come to mutually agreeable terms to purchase one of the last, great wrestling libraries available. I would love to see WWE own the library, maximize the legacy of the promotion, and at the same time provide a fair payday to the owners."

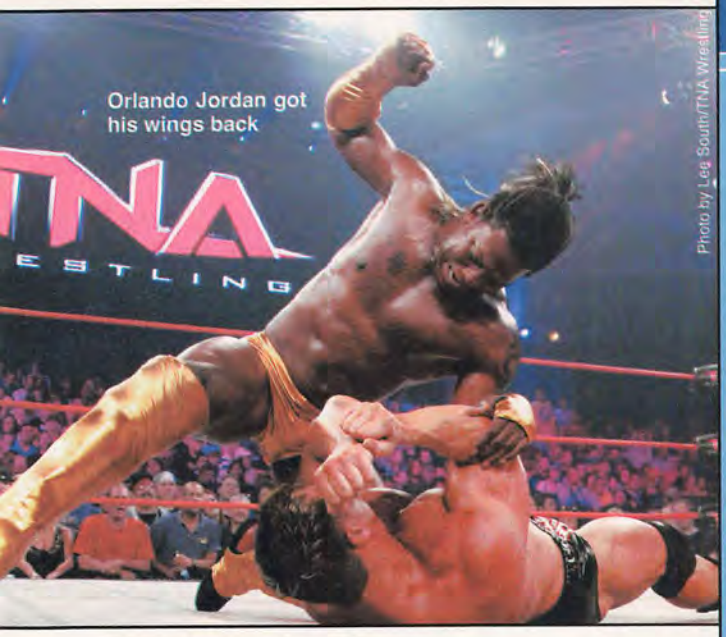
Ross has particular interest in the Mid-South/UWF library, considering he got his start as a referee in that territory in the 1970s and later returned to become the promotion's lead announcer in the 1980s. Also of note, Ross made sure to give a plug for the current Mid-South website, universalwrestling.com, where fans can buy videos. No wonder he annoys Vince McMahon so much!

This 'n' that: Jake "The Machine" Davis pinned **Vince Vega** for the Elite Pro heavyweight title at the Keyser National Guard Armory in West Virginia ... **Dr. X** is vowing to end **El Fuego's** career down in Mexico's EMLL ... The team of **Adam Cole** and **Kyle O'Reilly** defeated **The Bravado Brothers** in Richmond, Virginia, to win Ring of Honor's $5,000 Tag Team Lottery and a future shot at the tag team title.

From the Like Mother, Like Daughter Dept.: Vickie Guerrero once came across as shy, polite, and gracious, but, once she hit her stride in WWE, her beast was unleashed! The same appears to be happening to her daughter, **Shaul Guerrero**, who is serving as a manager under the name **Raquel Diaz** in Florida Championship Wrestling. Consider this bout in Gainesville: Her charge, **Alexander Rusev**, was battling **DeSean Bishop** while she proceeded to do obnoxious color commentary on the live mike! It must have worked, because Rusev used a modified German suplex to score a win over Bishop.

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

J.R. and UWF broadcast partner Joel Watts in 1985



Orlando Jordan got his wings back

Photo by Leg South/TNA Wrestling

the Ohio State Fair, held in Columbus. To determine a new titleholder, the NWA has sanctioned a three-way bout involving Pearce, North American champion **Shaun Tempers**, and National champion **Chance Prophet**.

But The Sheik does have a consolation prize. One week before losing the NWA title, he defeated **Ryouji Sai** for the Zero1 heavyweight championship in a title-vs.-title bout in Tokyo at the Destructive King 7th Anniversary of Death Commemoration event.

Kid Kash has returned to Showtime All-Star Wrestling and won a third International title. After **Phill Shatter** vacated the championship (to pursue his career as **Gunner** in TNA), SAW held a tournament to determine a new champion. In the semifinals, **Chase Stevens** and **Tommy Mercer** (known as **Crimson** in TNA) fought to a double-countout. That meant the other semifinal—Kid Kash vs. **Chris Michaels**—would determine the new champion.

It was a wild bout, with matchmaker **Reno Riggins** having to run in to officiate the match after two referees had been injured. In the end, Riggins made the fair three-count after Kash executed a brainbuster on Michaels. But longtime enemies Riggins and Kash soon got into a heated argument, with Kash revealing that he was the culprit who had stolen valuable SAW camera equipment and several weeks of television programming a few months ago.

"It was me, you moron," Kash told Riggins. "You cost me the title. I cost you your show." Riggins, who had wrestled in the WWF for several years in the late-1980s and early-'90s, tore into Kash. He's now vowing to come out of his 12-year retirement to get his hands on Kash in a sanctioned match.

News from the Funking Conservatory: Longtime promoter **Bert Prentice** saved the day during a recent six-man tag team match pitting **Dory Funk Jr.**, **Leo Cristiani**, and **Cory "Wild Wild" Weston** against **Fushicho Masuku**, **Karl "Mad Dog" Madetzke**, and **Luke Spencer**. Masuku appeared to pin Funk, but Prentice—who was serving as the former NWA World champion's corner man that night—demanded a replay of the video that showed Funk's foot was on the rope. Funk, Cristiani, and Weston won the match after the restart … They haven't made much progress against Women's champ **Claudia Reiff**, but **Ms. Looki Atmi**

NEWS ANALYSIS

WWE'S GLOBAL QUEST. There has long been talk of WWE creating rosters for specific regions of the world, such as WWE Europe or WWE Mexico, to reduce the amount of international wear-and-tear on its performers. I still don't see this happening, considering WWE can barely maintain the integrity of a brand extension, but something tells me The Big Show—and his aching back—would really go for this idea.

HIS STINGER STILL WORKS. Sting is making nearly as much buzz at age 52 as he was at age 25. It's amazing that TNA decision-makers have made him the face of the company—and World champion—in the midst of its re-branding. The Undertaker is six years younger and I can't imagine WWE doing that for even "The Phenom." Is this an indictment of TNA or a compliment to Sting? I think it's the latter.

UNDERACHIEVERS NO MORE. Shelton Benjamin and Charlie Haas could never shake the underachiever label in WWE despite their tag team championship victories. That's because WWE officials thought that should've been just the beginning for Benjamin and Haas, who failed to duplicate that success in the singles ranks. But I would suggest that WWE was always the wrong home for WGTT. ROH suits them perfectly.

NOT CHIC TO BE SHEIK. Few of the NWA powerbrokers liked The Sheik as titleholder, especially Adam Pearce. But since when is a champion stripped of a title *before* he fails to show for an event? Well, I suppose if a relatively unknown wrestler in his mid-30s can resurrect a dead man's gimmick and become NWA champion, I shouldn't be surprised by executive decisions typical of the also-deceased Jack Tunney.

KASHING IN? Over the past few issues, I've referred to an incident in which several cameras and weeks of TV programming were stolen from a SAW production vehicle. It wasn't a storyline—it really did happen and caused immeasurable distress to the promotion. Now Kid Kash returns and claims he stole the goods. Did Kash really do it, or is he simply trying to infuriate Reno Riggins? Either way, the man is despicable.

WGTT: 2011 Tag Team of the Year?

Photo by George Tahinos

defeating **Mr. Anderson** for his fourth TNA World title at an *Impact Wrestling* taping in Orlando. He is now tied with Kurt Angle for the most TNA title reigns. Sting—with his new Joker persona—proved to be the master of the mind game, besting Mr. Anderson at every turn. Anderson put Sting in a Scorpion Deathlock. Sting responded by dropping Anderson with a Mic Check. **Bully Ray** ran down to the ring to help Anderson, his new Immortal comrade, but the lights went out and a mysterious clown entered the ring and nailed Anderson with Sting's trademark bat. Sting hit the Scorpion Deathdrop and it was over—in classic TNA style.

Generation Me has requested and been granted their releases from TNA. Their major complaint was not being booked enough at live events, having been involved in only three TNA tours during the first six months of 2011. **Max** and **Jeremy Buck's** last match occurred at Destination X, where they lost to TV champ **Eric Young** and **Shark Boy** in a comedy match.

This is a disappointing turn of events, considering the Bucks were met by such fanfare—including an announcement by TNA President **Dixie Carter**—when they joined the company in 2009. Max and Jeremy will likely revert to their previous ring names—**Matt** and **Nick Jackson**—on the independent scene. They are already the Pro Wrestling Guerrilla tag team champions, having defeated **El Generico** and **Ricochet** for the belts back in April.

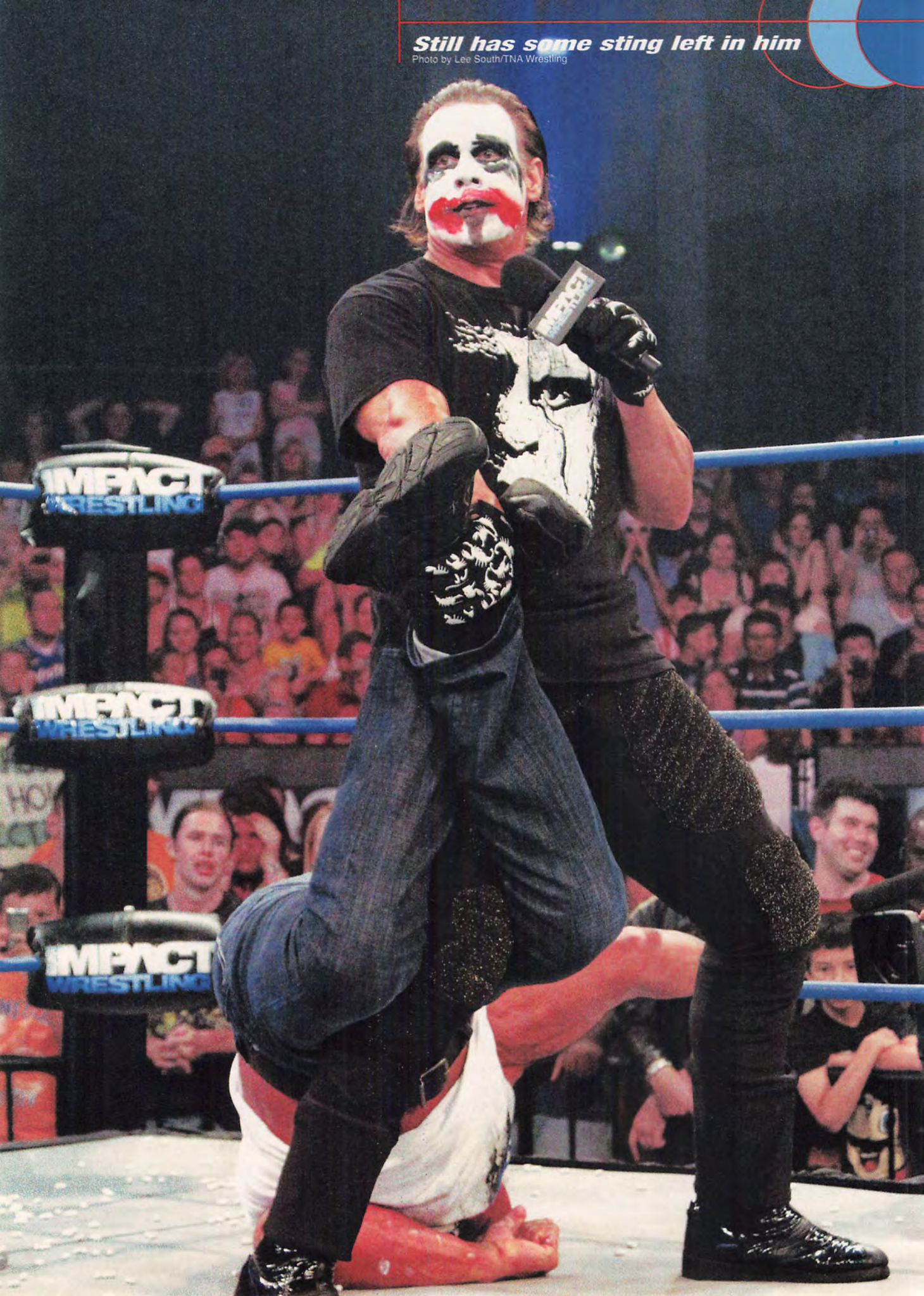
Orlando Jordan also announced his departure from TNA. Although his artistic vision of becoming a 2011 **Goldust** didn't evolve into full maturity, Jordan had nothing but good things to say about his time with the company. "I want to thank the TNA lockerroom for allowing me to shake things up and try to shine a light on some preconceived perceptions I deal with every day personally and professionally," stated Jordan via Twitter. "I got my wings back! So let's fly!"

Frankly, we don't know exactly what Jordan means about shining a light on "preconceived perceptions" other than the fact that he did his best to perpetuate preconceived perceptions. Oh, well. Fly, Orlando, fly!

Congratulations go out to **Shelton Benjamin** and **Charlie Haas**, who successfully defended the Ring of Honor tag team title in a sensational four-team elimination match at Best in the World 2011, held on June 26 at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom, the site of many legendary cards. They outlasted and outwrestled three of the best teams in the sport—**Kenny King** and **Rhett Titus**, **Chris Hero** and **Claudio Castagnoli**, and **The Briscoe Brothers**—in a 40-minute classic.

Wrestling's Greatest Tag Team has been on quite a roll since defeating Hero and Castagnoli for the belts back in April. Midway through 2011, Benjamin and Haas—supposedly past their prime—have an excellent shot at becoming *PWI's* Tag Team of the Year again. It would be the first TTOTY for WGTT since 2003, thanks to ROH! Unless they go AWOL or back to WWE.

Breaking news in the NWA! **The Sheik** has been stripped of the NWA heavyweight championship. The NWA Board of Directors made the decision in an emergency session when it was learned that The Sheik was planning *not* to defend the title against three-time former champ **Adam Pearce** on July 31 at



Still has some sting left in him

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

names makin' news

By Harry Burkett

JUSTIN GABRIEL RECEIVED a hero's welcome when he entered the ring to face the sensational **Sin Cara** on July 6 at the Grand West Casino in Cape Town, South Africa. And it was only one of many magical moments that took place during the Smackdown brand's five-city tour of South Africa this summer.

Gabriel proved he was in Sin Cara's league within the first five minutes of the match, but, unfortunately, he didn't have a chance to prove he was the better wrestler. **Ted DiBiase Jr.** and **Cody Rhodes** called a temporary truce in order to disrupt the match, prompting the referee to disqualify Gabriel. It was a bogus decision, considering DiBiase and Rhodes were simply trying to steal the spotlight. Gabriel grabbed the microphone and said he didn't want to disappoint his hometown fans, and he and Sin Cara agreed to take on the former WWE World tag champs. Ten minutes later, Gabriel unfurled his breathtaking 450-splash to lead his team to victory.

Christian received a mixed reaction prior to his World title match against champion **Randy Orton** in Cape Town. But Christian sealed his relationship with the fans by complaining about some wrestlers' belongings being stolen during the tour (*flip this magazine over to see "What's Happening," page 6*). He became an instant heel and had an exciting match against Orton, with former WWF World heavyweight champion **Bret Hart** as the special enforcer. There was an explosive finish to the bout, as Christian came off the top rope with a flying sunset flip attempt, only to have Orton turn it into a mid-air RKO! Hart added the perfect finishing touch by clamping on the Sharpshooter, forcing Christian to tap out at the end of the show.

Although the same basic Smackdown crew appeared at every show, matchmakers freshened up the bouts to make each event unique. For Smackdown's second show in Cape Town, ringside observers claimed that **Daniel Bryan** vs. Ted DiBiase Jr. was the best match of the night, with a great blend of high-flying and grappling, and even an incident where DiBiase jawed with a **Hulk Hogan** look-alike in the front row. The good news about this bout was that at least one of these long-suffering competitors—Bryan and DiBiase—would finally be able to grab a win. This time, Bryan came out on top.

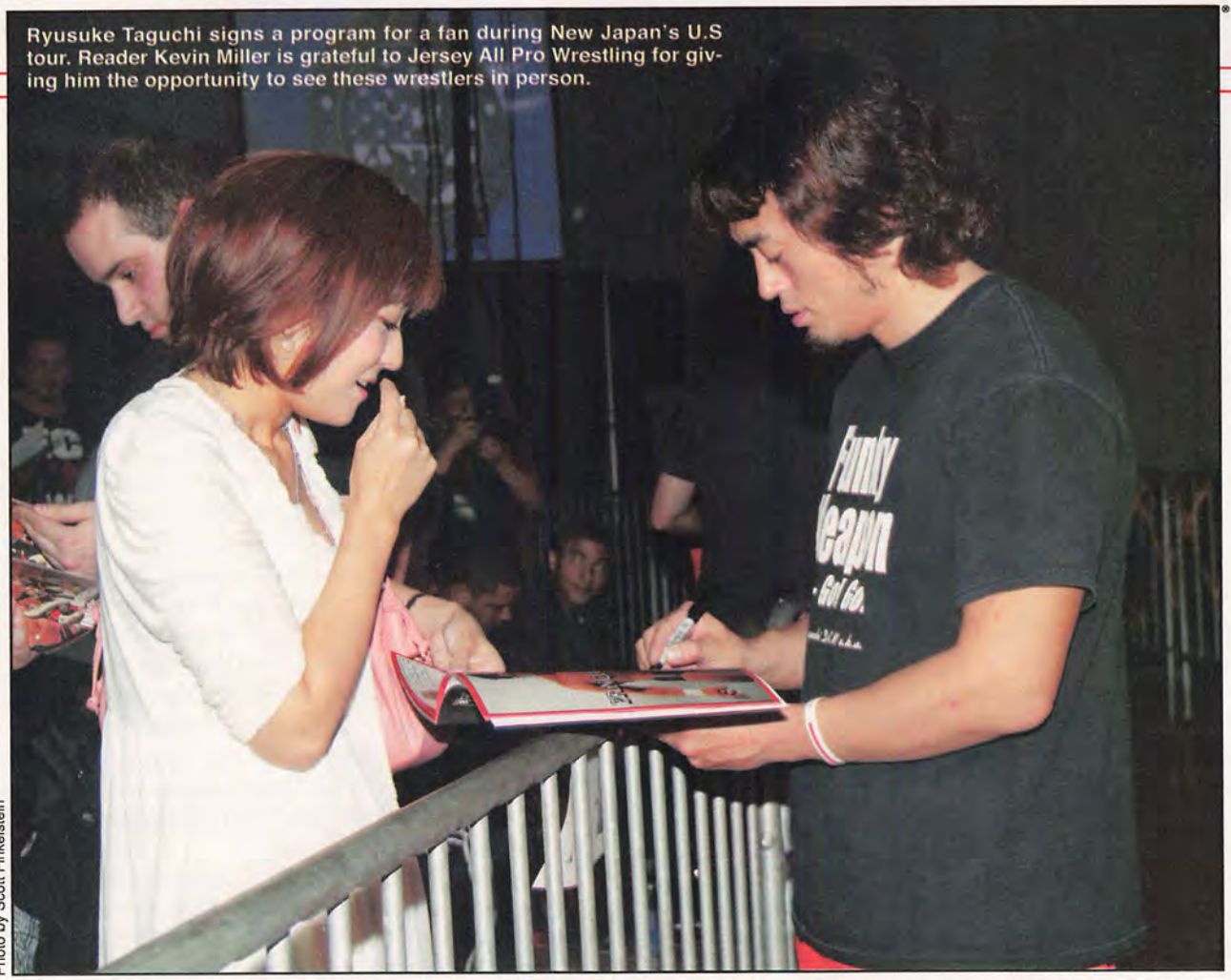
And the tour continued on to Durban on July 8 and finished up with back-to-back shows at the Dome in Johannesburg on July 9 and 10. In the final main event of the tour, World champion Orton teamed with Gabriel and **The Big Show** to face Christian, **Alberto Del Rio**, and **Mark Henry**, with Bret Hart as the special enforcer. Orton used an RKO to pin Christian. Although Orton and Big Show received much louder reactions, fans were still disappointed they didn't have a chance to see Gabriel's 450 that night.

Mouth won Christian no friends in South Africa

Photo by George Napolitano

In other international news, the tour bus for **Chris Jericho's** band, Fozzy, was involved in an accident in Denmark. Apparently, the bus skidded on two wheels for about 50 feet and the side door was completely torn off. The band had to cancel that night's show, but was able to make Hamburg, Germany, the following night. Jericho, who was lucky enough to be on Anthrax' tour bus at the time, was very relieved that his bandmates were okay. Tweeted Jericho, "Now I'm on a train from Aarhus to Hamburg with nothing but a toothbrush and a pair of flip-flops."

Sting made history on July 11 by



Ryusuke Taguchi signs a program for a fan during New Japan's U.S tour. Reader Kevin Miller is grateful to Jersey All Pro Wrestling for giving him the opportunity to see these wrestlers in person.

Photo by Scott Finkelstein

meaningful match, which only proves what I've been saying about Van Dam all along: He's a big shot in small promotions like ECW, but he's not a prime-time player, no matter how many times he refers to himself as "Mr. Monday Night."

JOE SPIVENTA
Bronx, NY

THANK YOU, JAPW

I would like to give a big shout out and two thumbs up to Jersey All Pro Wrestling for hosting what I thought was an awesome evening of wrestling on May 13, when New Japan Pro Wrestling made its first appearance in the U.S.

After years of trading tapes and discs, my friends and I were finally able to see some of our favorite Japanese wrestlers in action, and right here on the East Coast! Thanks again, JAPW, and please bring these guys back again soon!

KEVIN MILLER
Staten Island, NY

NO RESPECT

It's a fact that The Miz draws negativity with his arrogance and inflated opinion of himself. However, it is also a fact that he has improved tremendously in the ring. Of course, he is not at the level of Randy Orton or, on a technical basis, even Cody Rhodes, but he's much better than he used to be. I think if wrestling fans are honest with themselves, they will admit the obvious and maybe show The Miz some more respect.

COREY JENNINGS
Los Angeles, CA

MUSIC TO HIS EARS

For years, I've been hearing about how special CM Punk was supposed to be on the mike, but in all honesty, he never sounded that great to me. However, the rant he delivered at the end of the June 27 episode of *Raw* sold me on him all the way. In fact, I would dare say that CM Punk is the best wrestler to pick up a microphone since The Rock.

There have been lots of good talkers over the years, but Punk was operating on a higher plane than any of them that night. Not only did he know what he wanted to say, he actually got it all out with no delays, mistakes, or hiccups of any kind. Imagine that, a wrestler who means what he says and says what he means, and one who has an actual point that he wants to make—and then makes it!

If Punk never wrestles another match in his life, I'd still watch just to hear him speak. Punk Rules!

JOSH STANGARD
Philadelphia, PA □

sincerely yours

Send letters to:
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KELLY: PRO AND CON

Why is everybody complaining about Kelly Kelly being the Divas champion? Obviously, she isn't a great wrestler, but she is the champion, so she must be doing something right. Until she loses the title, I think people should just leave her alone.

CARLOTTA DOWLING
Evansville, IN

Maybe it's me, but I am wondering what purpose the WWE Divas division serves. When I think of who the past three champions have been—Kelly Kelly, Brie Bella, and Eve—I just shake my head in bewilderment.

Yes, they are beautiful women, but how WWE can feature them in championship matches when Beth Phoenix, Melina, Natalya, and Gail Kim barely get any TV time is beyond my comprehension.

Kelly Kelly makes a championship swimsuit model, but a championship wrestler? I don't think so.

NICOLE JOHNSTON
Tacoma, WA

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Kelly Kelly's ascension to the Divas championship has caused debate among WWE fans. Some feel she deserves her spot atop the women's ranks, while others feel she's little more than a swimsuit model.

RIGHT YOU ARE

I enjoyed your "SummerSlam 50" article (Volume 40, 2011) and agreed with most of your rankings. However, I'd like to point out that Steve Austin did not lose the title to Kurt Angle at SummerSlam 2001, as noted twice. Kurt won the match via DQ (though he did go on to win the belt at Unforgiven a month later). Moreover, your rating of Owen Hart and Ken Shamrock had me confused, as you claimed that each of the two won the match against the other in their respective sections. Turns out Owen lost—which still does not make the SummerSlam record you printed (0-3) correct, as he did defeat Savio Vega in '96. I appreciate the work going into compiling such an elaborate report and I love such rankings, but do try to get the facts straight!

CHRISTIAN AUINGER
Vienna, Austria

MR. OVERRATED?

My, how the mighty have fallen. I'm referring to Rob Van Dam. RVD was certainly riding high when he first came to TNA and Hulk Hogan was there pulling the strings for him. Who else just walks into a wrestling company and gets two main-event matches on the same show, and wins the World title his first night in?

But ever since Hogan started to fade, Van Dam hasn't been in a

inside wrestling

THE MAGAZINE THAT RIPS THE LID OFF PRO WRESTLING

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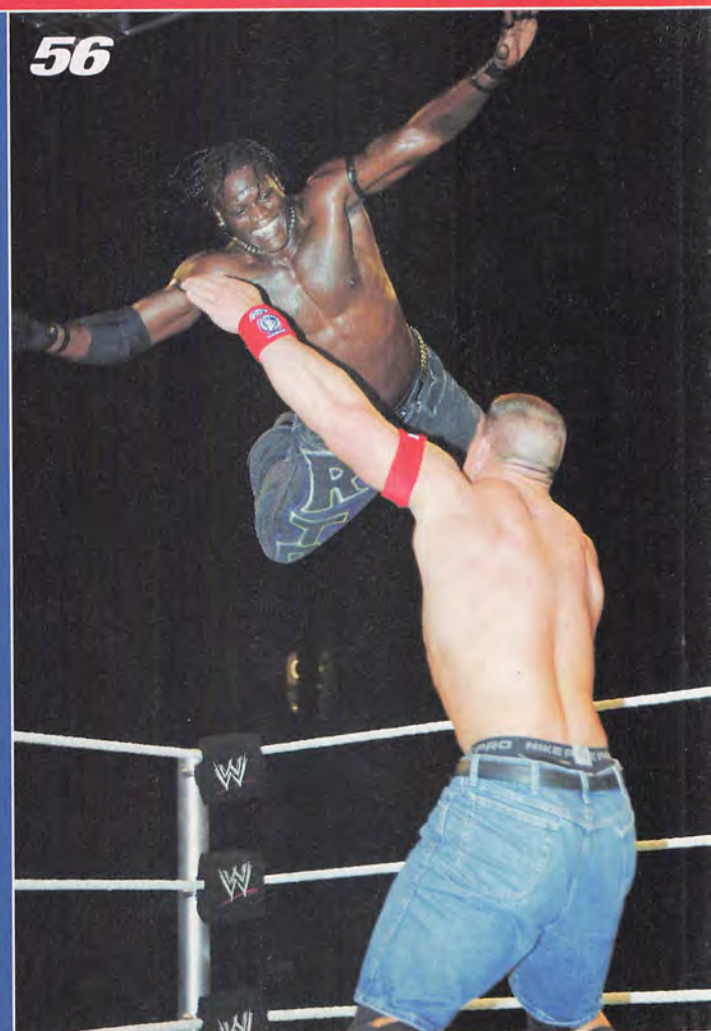
Feeling as if he was at a standstill in WWE, MVP risked it all to start over in Japan ... and up until now, it looks like he made a wise decision

46 CRIMSON: "IF I CAN HANDLE IRAQ, NOTHING IN WRESTLING WILL RATTLE ME!"
Bullies always like to pick on the new kid, but so far, none of the bullies in TNA have beaten this Iraq War veteran, and it may just stay that way for a while

54 NO DOUBTS ABOUT IT!
HOW DOLPH ZIGGLER SURVIVED HIS CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE (AND WITHOUT VICKIE'S HELP)
You might think twice about giving Vickie too much credit for Dolph Ziggler's recent success after reading this story

56 PLAYING US FOR THE FOOLS WE ARE!
CHRISTIAN & R-TRUTH KNOW WE'LL FORGIVE THEM
Call them cheaters, villains, heels ... it doesn't matter. Sooner or later, we'll all be cheering for Christian and R-Truth again. Why? Because that's what we do



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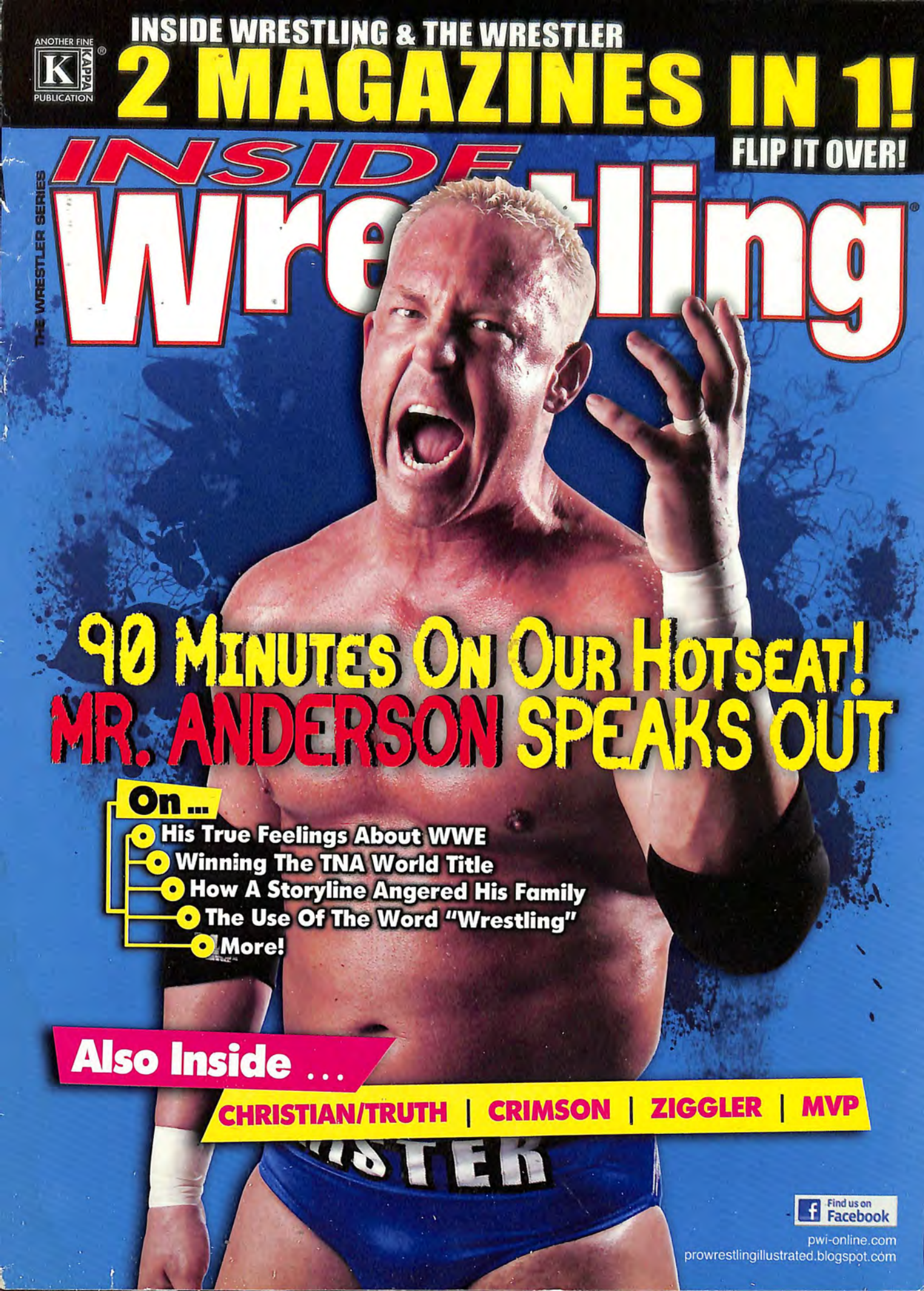

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